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Call for papers from biblical, historical, theological, and practical perspectives until Monday 15 June 2015. Possibility of publication in IBTSC Journal. Contact Stuart Blythe, for further details blythe@ibts.eu

While there is no charge for the lectures or conference those attending and participating in the conference will be required to meet own travel, accommodation, and subsistence costs in Amsterdam.

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Contents

Editorial	4
Parush R Parushev	
A Baptist Vision of the Church	5
Karen E Smith	
<i>The Church: Towards a Common Vision</i>	21
A Believers Church Response	
Teun van der Leer	
‘The Word of God in the Life of the Church’: A Traveller’s Guide—Background, Broader Perspectives and Challenges	32
Tony Peck	
Book Reviews	51

Editorial

In this issue of *JEBS* we continue publishing papers delivered at the European Baptist Theology Teachers Conference, which took place in the Baptist Centre in Radość, Warszawa, Poland, 02-05 July 2014. The papers published here were presented as plenary contributions at the conference and set the agenda for the discussions (see *JEBS* 15:2).

The keynote lecture of Dr. Karen E. Smith identifies central themes in Baptist ecclesiology. The church is a covenant community, which is 'gathered' by God. Christ is the Lord of the Church and members of the church are servants under his authority called to share in his suffering. Decisions about the church's life and work, mission and ministry are made as the church meets together to 'seek the mind of Christ'. However the wider communion of Christ's followers is often overlooked in the discussions.

Drs Teun van der Leer takes a closer look at the ecumenical document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, which challenges churches to reflect on the difference between the 'believed' and the 'experienced' church. He is doing that from the perspective of the Believers Church Tradition, which is constituted through the gathering of believers who profess the good news in words and deeds. With the end of the *Corpus Christianum*, he argues, the time is coming for the 'congregationalization of all Christianity'. This leads to a strong emphasis on the embodied local faith-expression. The outcome of that is the domestication of God's grace by the ecclesiastical culture – the so-called 'grace plus', which causes unnecessary divisions.

Anthony (Tony) Peck – the general secretary of the EBF, reflects as a Baptist participant on major theological themes contained in the 2013 Report of theological Conversations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance. The key elements of the Report are outlined with areas of convergence and divergence explored further. Also discussed are the differing ecclesiologies that give rise to different methodologies in defining doctrine in the two traditions, and how these were handled in the Conversations. The Report is helpfully set in the context of other theological dialogues involving Baptists and Roman Catholics. The article explores signs of changing attitudes towards Roman Catholics by Baptists.

The Revd Doc Dr Parush R Parushev
Vice-Rector, IBTS Centre in Amsterdam

Erratum: Dr. Mark Braverman's religious affiliation was mistakenly acknowledged in the Editorial article of issue 15:1. He identifies himself clearly as a faithful Jew. The Editor offers sincere apologies to Dr. Braverman and to the readers of *JEBS*.

A Baptist Vision of the Church

Karen E Smith

Abstract: Several key themes in Baptist ecclesiology may be identified. The church is a covenant community, which is ‘gathered’ by God. Christ is Lord of the Church and members of the church are servants under the authority of Christ and are called to share in the suffering of Christ. Decisions about the church’s life and work, mission and ministry are made as the church meets together to ‘seek the mind of Christ’. Often overlooked in a discussion of Baptist ecclesiology is the wider communion of saints.

Key Words: covenant, fellowship, suffering, community

In 1923 when W. T. Whitley published *A History of British Baptists*, he claimed that ‘their distinctive feature is the doctrine of the church: that it must consist wholly of people who have pledged themselves to Christ Jesus, to live the life He desires, to win and train more disciples for His service’.¹ Given that most Christians would agree that the church as a whole should consist of members who are committed to Christ and concerned for mission and evangelism, such a broad statement of Baptist ecclesiology does not seem to present anything distinctive or particular about a Baptist perspective. So what is distinctively a Baptist ecclesiology?

Among British Baptists there is a very long trail of books and pamphlets that attempt to clarify the Baptist understanding of the church. In 1944, for instance, Arthur Dakin, wrote a small work entitled, *The Baptist View of the Church and Ministry*.² However, it appears that from the beginning questions were raised by the use of the definite article in the title. Seeking to assure readers that the book did not claim to offer ‘the’ definitive view, but ‘a’ Baptist view of the church, M. E. Aubrey (then General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain) wrote a preface acknowledging that the Baptist Union had agreed to the idea for a book to ‘set forth plainly the views generally held in the denomination concerning the Church and the Ministry’.³ Aubrey explained that Dr Dakin had prepared the outline for such a book, and it had then been submitted to a meeting of principals of British Baptist theological colleges for discussion. Apparently due to their inability to agree on certain points (most notably the idea of ministry), the Principals decided that Dakin should write the book and it would be published

¹ W. T. Whitley, *A History of British Baptists* (London: Charles Griffin and Co., 1923), p. 4.

² Arthur Dakin was Principal of the Bristol Baptist College from 1924 to 1953.

³ A. Dakin, *The Baptist View of the Church and Ministry* (London: The Baptist Union, 1944), p. 4.

... with the commendation of the conference of college principals, though not necessarily with their concurrence on all points, and with their hope that that it may stimulate thought and discussion among ministers and lay members of our churches and lead to clearer insights and a deeper conviction.⁴

The inability of a small group of British Baptist college principals to agree on a statement of Baptist ecclesiology in the twentieth century is illustrative of the problem that has always existed among European Baptists and, indeed, among Baptists worldwide. Given the myriad social, cultural and political contexts in which Baptists find themselves, it is not surprising that there are many different views of a Baptist understanding of the church. Indeed, the ecclesiological views of some people may seem to others to be little more than an expression of the church's 'cultural captivity'.⁵ While it is impossible to find agreement on every aspect of Baptist ecclesiology, this paper will explore three themes that historically have been important to a Baptist understanding of the church:

- 1) The church is a covenant community, which is 'gathered' by God and members are called to live in fellowship with God and one another.
- 2) Christ is Lord of the church and members of the church are servants under the authority of Christ and are called to share in the suffering of Christ.
- 3) Decisions about the church's life and work, mission and ministry are made as the church meets together to 'seek the mind of Christ'.

A Gathered Church

In 1944, Ernest Payne, a British Baptist scholar and committed ecumenist, wrote a small but important volume entitled *The Fellowship of Believers*. Widely accepted as a good summary of some commonly held views among Baptists, Payne's work remains an important guide to Baptist ecclesiology. Payne emphasised that as children of the Protestant European Reformations, there are at least four beliefs that Baptists shared with continental Reformers:

- 1) '[S]alvation is by faith, that is, by direct individual response to the grace offered by God in Christ. Neither priest nor Church stands between God and the believer'.
- 2) Scripture is authoritative both for faith and practice.
- 3) The church is both 'visible' and 'invisible'.

⁴ Dakin, *The Baptist View of the Church and Ministry*, p. 4. Dakin's view of ministry was probably most divisive. He believed that a person could only be a Baptist minister if serving a local church.

⁵The phrase 'cultural captivity' was used to describe the plight of Southern Baptists in the twentieth century. John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville, Tenn.: The University of Tennessee Press, 1972, second printing, 1976).

- 4) ‘A belief in the presence of the Spirit of the living Christ with His people, leading them on to ever fuller apprehension of truth and to an ever holier way of life’.⁶

Payne’s emphasis throughout the book is, of course, summarised in the title *A Fellowship of Believers*. Noting the rich diversity among Baptists on biblical, ethical, and doctrinal matters, he maintained that Baptists reacted to the idea that the church was a ‘great visible institution, centralised and authoritarian’, but stressed the idea of the invisible church, the company of the elect whose names are known to God.⁷ Moreover, unlike churches organised on Episcopal or Presbyterian patterns of government, Baptists based their ecclesiology on the belief that the church visible is evident in small, local congregations. The church visible was to be seen in local groups of believers who came together ‘deliberately because of their common faith to carry out the ordinances of the Gospel and who can rely on the word of Jesus according to Matthew xviii. 20 “Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them”’.⁸

Payne’s understanding of the importance of the local nature of congregational life is consistent with early confessions of faith. For instance, in *A Declaration of Faith of English People remaining at Amsterdam in Holland* (1611) it says that:

That the members off everie Church or Congregation ought to knowe one another, so that they may performe all the duties off love towards another both to soule and bodie. Mat18.15. I Thes 5.14 I Cor. 12.25 And especiallie the Elders ought to knowe the whole flock, whereof the Holie Ghost hath made them overseers Acts 2-.28; I Peter 5.2,3 And therefore a Church ought not to consist off such a multitude as cannot have particular knowledg one off another.⁹

Interpreting this as a kind of manifesto for independence, Payne suggested that:

Here the spiritual autonomy of each local company of believers is asserted, their right to appoint their own officers claimed, and their numbers limited to a group who can have ‘particular knowledge of one another’.¹⁰

A cursory reading of Payne’s comments might suggest that he was asserting the independence or ‘autonomy’ of the local congregation. Or indeed, that he was simply reinforcing the idea of congregational polity or

⁶ E. A. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers, Baptist Thought and Practice Yesterday and Today* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1944), pp. 20-21.

⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ ‘A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland, 1611’, in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1959, revised 1969), p. 121.

¹⁰ Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers*, p. 23.

the idea that the church is self-governing and not under the control of the state. Yet, at a very basic level, it seems that Payne was emphasising that for Baptists, the church is made up of people who are called by God to be in relationship with one another. Indeed, as Payne suggests, the church is to be a 'fellowship of believers'.

Fellowship is a word used with different meanings in our modern context. Payne was not suggesting that the church was simply a social gathering of friends or people with similar interests. Nor was church membership entered into lightly as a simple matter of individual choice. Rather, congregational fellowship according to the early Baptist witness was dependent on individuals being brought together by God. They were 'gathered' by God, called by Christ, and their fellowship was 'in Christ'.¹¹ As the *Second London Confession* put it:

The Members of these Churches are Saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ; and do willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving up themselves, to the Lord and to one another by the will of God, in professed subjection to the Ordinances of the Gospel.¹²

The emphasis on the church being part of God's creation in Christ is an important one. Having responded by faith to the free offer of God's grace, early Baptist believers insisted that at baptism they not only testified to their desire to repent of sin and walk in newness of life, but baptism was also a sign of incorporation into the body of Christ and a sign of union with Christ in his death and resurrection.¹³ As it was stated by Calvinistic Baptists, the believer through baptism was 'engrafted into' Christ and his body, the church.¹⁴ While there are different views on the sacramental nature of baptism, it has always been regarded by Baptists as necessary to fellowship with and in Christ.¹⁵ For early Baptists, as well as being a public confession of personal faith in Christ, believer's baptism marked the entry of the believer into the community of Christ. It marked the incorporation into Christ and into his body, the church. Similarly, the Lord's Supper not only served as a reminder of Christ's love and sacrifice, but also provided an

¹¹ For a discussion on the church as the people of God, see Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne and Anthony R. Cross, *On Being the Church, Revisioning Baptist Identity* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008), pp. 20-28.

¹² See the 'Second London Confession', (1677, 1688/9), in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 286.

¹³ 'Second London Confession', in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, pp. 290-291 and 'The Orthodox Creed' (1679), Lumpkin *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, pp. 317-318.

¹⁴ The Second London Confession, p. 291. The language of 'ingrafting' is also used in the 'Orthodox Creed', Article XXVIII, Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, p. 317.

¹⁵ Anthony R. Cross has written extensively on the view of baptism as a sacrament. See, for example, *Baptism and Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth Century Britain* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000) and 'The Myth of English Baptist Anti-Sacramentalism', in *Recycling the Past or Researching History? Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 128-162.

opportunity to share in communion with Christ and in fellowship with other believers.

The emphasis on fellowship in Christ was often expressed in hymns. Benjamin Beddome (1717-1795), an eighteenth-century English Baptist pastor and author of over eight-hundred hymns, who served as pastor of the church at Bourton-on-the-Water for fifty-five years, wrote often of the closeness that believers feel in Christ.

Oh blessed society
Of saints in friendship joined!
From envy, wrath and malice free
In words and actions kind.

No strife, but to excel
No hatred, but of sin
A perfect harmony without,
Substantial peace within.

Each other's joys they feel,
Each other's sorrows share;
Unite in melody of praise
In fervency of prayer

Thus in the world above
Myriads surround the throne
In loftier worship they engage
And all their hearts are one.¹⁶

As a way of giving expression to their belief that God had called them together or had 'gathered them' into a congregation, some British Baptists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries drew up covenant documents. In these they spoke of being called together by God and indicated their desire to 'walk together' in the 'ways of Christ revealed or yet to be made known'.¹⁷ Covenant agreements included statements, which set forth duties and privileges of membership in a local fellowship of believers. These articles seemed to emphasise practical issues of living together rather than doctrinal unanimity. Their purpose was to state that the members had been 'called out' by God into a special relationship to be the visible community of saints, and

¹⁶ Benjamin Beddome, 'Unity and Love', no. 637 in *Hymns Adapted to Public Worship or Family Devotion* (London: Burton and Briggs, 1818), n.p.

¹⁷ For four uses of the term 'covenant', see Paul S. Fiddes, "'Walking Together': The Place of Covenant Theology in Baptist Life Yesterday and Today", in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B.R. White*, eds., W. H. Brackney, Paul S. Fiddes, with J. H. Y. Briggs (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1999), pp. 50-58. While in theory it is possible to speak of the "eternal covenant of grace" as being distinct from the covenant agreement God makes with his church, or the written covenant agreements made by church members, early Baptists do not seem to have made that distinction. Fiddes notes the difficulty of separating the uses of the term 'covenant' and suggests that at times 'they are woven together in a harmonious pattern or even into a single multiple-stranded thread', p. 51.

having responded to that calling through the waters of baptism, they were now entering into a covenant relationship with God and one another. This entailed pledging themselves to embrace both the duties and the privileges of church membership, including worship, prayer for one another, attendance at the ordinances, and participation in the discipline and government of the congregation.

While the significance of the idea of covenant, both biblically and historically, to British Baptists in particular is notable, the language of covenant and the use of written covenants may not have been so central to other Baptist theologies. While it may be argued from a seventeenth-century British Baptist perspective that covenant theology is important to Baptist ecclesiology and should be re-discovered or usefully adopted by all Baptists, my purpose here is not to discuss further the importance of covenant life. Nor is it to argue whether adherence to written covenant documents should be part of Baptist life. Rather, the point to be made here is that whether one begins with the Separatist tradition formative for British Baptists in the seventeenth century or looks to continental Anabaptists as important shapers of European Baptists, among all Baptists is the insistence on the idea of the church being gathered by God. The clear premise is that God is always gathering and drawing and calling individuals to life in relationship with God and one another.

In Baptist life, the theology of covenant relationship has been revisited in recent years and has been drawn on to encourage relationships among Baptists in the local church and in a wider sphere.¹⁸ Certainly, Ernest Payne, a firm ecumenist, believed that fellowship in Christ was not limited to the local church. Even as the local church was based on fellowship with God and one another, so he was eager to see Baptists build strong relationships with other Christians. Local churches were not to ignore the wider relationships. As he put it:

Associations, Synods, Unions and Assemblies of churches are not to be regarded as optional or secondary. They are the necessary expression of Christian fellowship, a necessary manifestation of the Church visible. The local Church is not truly a church if it lives an entirely separate life.¹⁹

The idea of covenant relationships appears to have been a seminal part of the discussions held between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance between 2006 and 2010. In the report of their conversations, the point is made that:

¹⁸See for instance, Paul S. Fiddes, Roger Hayden, Richard L. Kidd, Keith W. Clements and Brian Haymes, eds., *Bound to Love: The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission* (London: The Baptist Union, 1985); cf. Fiddes, 'Walking Together'.

¹⁹ Payne, *A Fellowship of Believers*, p. 27.

The *koinonia* of the church may also be understood as a ‘covenant community’ although this language is less familiar to Catholics than to Baptists. ‘Covenant’ expresses at once both the initiative and prior activity of God in making relationship with his people through Christ, and the willing commitment of people to each other and to God. The church is a ‘gift’ in the sense that it is ‘gathered’ by Christ, and it ‘gathers’ in response to the call of Christ. The term *ekklesia* indicates an ‘assembly’ that is ‘called out’ by God. Calling the church a ‘fellowship of believers’ does not mean that the church is constituted only by faith: faith is always a response to the initiating grace of God. The fellowship or *koinonia* of the church itself is both a gift and calling, just as the unity of the church is both a gift of the Spirit and a task to be achieved.²⁰

The report of the Catholic-Baptist conversations also stresses that ‘covenant’ should not be confused with a legal contract or a merely ‘voluntary agreement’. Rather:

Covenant is based on the calling of God through Christ, and from their beginnings Baptists have understood that the eternal “covenant of grace” between God and humanity, initiated by God, is actualised in a particular time and place when believers covenant together in a local church.²¹

Over the years, many people have equated the idea of a ‘gathered church’ with words like ‘congregational’, ‘autonomous’, ‘free’, and ‘self-governing’. When discussing the Baptist view of the church, the claim is made that membership in a Baptist church is voluntary. To make this claim, seems to suggest that the idea of the ‘gathered church’ is merely related to congregational polity. This view ignores the deep theological understanding of covenant relationship and communion in Christ.

A friend of mine told me the story of an occasion when two people came to his church from another Christian denomination and said that they wanted to ‘join the church’ and become Baptists. ‘We heard that you decide for yourselves what you want to do’, they said. My friend was surprised and dismayed that they thought that self-government was the centre-piece of Baptist life. They seemed to have no idea of the meaning of a ‘gathered church’ or life together in covenant community. While it is true that early seventeenth-century British Baptists, like their Separatist forbears, believed church membership should not be coerced by the state, strictly speaking, membership is not simply a voluntary action by a believer. Rather, membership within the church in the Baptist understanding, as we have noted, is a response to a call from God to be in a special relationship with God and one another. The church is made up of those who, by confessing

²⁰ ‘The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between The Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, 2006-2010’, paragraph 16 in *American Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XXXI, Vol. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 40.

²¹ ‘The Word of God in the Life of the Church’, paragraph 17, p. 40.

faith through the waters of baptism, have responded to the call of God and who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The Lordship of Christ: Sharing in Suffering

From the beginning, Baptists have stressed that Christ is the Head of the church; the church is under the Lordship of Christ. As Bill Leonard put it so succinctly:

The church is not just a community of believers, but a community of believers in Jesus. It is not simply a community which serves others, but a community which serves others in the name of Jesus. All which the church is and does is informed by the activity in Jesus Christ.²²

The idea of being ‘gathered by God’ to be a church meant that the early Baptists never equated the church with an institution or institutional structure. In fact, they shied away from anything or anyone that appeared ready to seize ecclesial control. While they formed general meetings or associations for the purpose of fellowship and support, they did not believe these groups should have final authority over the local body of believers. Instead, each gathered community of faith was free to come together in order to worship and to listen to the voice of God speaking to them.

The importance of congregational life among British Calvinistic Baptists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is highlighted in a book published by Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) entitled: *The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline display'd* (1697).²³ He had been one of the signatories of the Second London Confession, and wrote forty-three works for which, on at least one occasion, he was fined, pilloried and imprisoned. *The Glory of a True Church*, written late in his life as a church manual and guide for order and discipline in the church, claimed that those who were part of the church,

...do by mutual agreement and consent give themselves up to the Lord, and one to another, according to the Will of God; and do ordinarily meet together in one Place, for the Public Service and Worship of God; among whom the Word of God and Sacraments are duly administered, according to Christ's Institution.²⁴

Significantly appended to this book on the church, was a sample church covenant which provided a pattern that was widely followed among many eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Baptists both in Britain and in the

²² Bill Leonard, *The Nature of the Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1986), p. 14.

²³ Keach, had been in a General Baptist congregation in Tooley Street, Southwark, before moving to serve as pastor of a Calvinistic congregation in Horsleydown in London. He was also at the centre of the controversy over hymn-singing among Baptists at the end of the seventeenth century. Austin Walker, ‘Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) Tailor Turned Preacher’, in J.H.Y. Briggs, ed., *Pulpit and People Studies in Eighteenth Century Baptist Life and Thought* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2009), pp. 25-42.

²⁴ Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline display'd* (London, 1697), p. 5.

American colonies. Not all churches used Keach's covenant, of course, but for those who adopted it as their own, the covenant, along with the Second London Confession of Faith, helped shape their life together. In the covenant, as well as in *The Glory of the True Church*, Keach stressed the need for mutual agreement and responsibility among members of a congregation. The covenant stated:

We do promise to bear one another's Burdens, to cleave to one another, and to have a Fellow-feeling with one another, in all Conditions both outward and inward, as God in his Providence shall cast any of us into. We do promise to bear one another's Weakness and Failings and Infirmities with much Tenderness not discovering to any without the Church, nor any within, unless according to Christ's Rule, and the Order of the Gospel provided in that case.²⁵

The idea of being under the rule of Christ and hence, promising to 'bear one another's burdens and cleave to one another' touches on the heart of relationship 'in Christ'. They believed that they had been joined together 'in Christ' and had given themselves up 'to the Lord and to one another'. This meant that they must share in the suffering of Christ and one another. This rich theological idea of being so bound together in the suffering love of God that suffering is shared, is difficult to discuss because in some respects suffering can never be truly shared. Who can truly understand, let alone enter into, the suffering of others? Yet, practically and spiritually it seems that Baptists took seriously the admonishment to 'Bear one another's burdens and in this may you fulfil the law of Christ' (Gal 6:2).

The New Testament idea of 'bearing one another's burdens' is one that was closely related to the Baptist idea that believers are 'joyned to the Lord and to each other by mutuall agreement'. By virtue of their commitment to Christ, they were called to enter into the sufferings of others. Not simply sharing the suffering of those who were in the community, but also identifying with others who were in need. As Keach claimed in *The Glory of the True Church*, it was the duty of church members, 'to Sympathize with the afflicted, Succour the Tempted, and Relieving the Poor and Distressed: Rejoicing with them that Rejoice and Mourning with them that Mourn'.²⁶

The words echo the words of the Apostle Paul when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ

²⁵ 'The Solemn Covenant of the Church of Christ, meeting in White-street, at it's Constitution' June, 5, 1696 appended to Keach, *The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline display'd*, p. 73.

²⁶ Keach, *The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline display'd*, p. 58.

are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3-7 NRSV).

The emphasis here is that because of our union with Christ and one another, in love Christians experience comfort, solace and strength which is beyond a person's control and surpasses understanding, and this may also be shared with others through a bond of love in Christ. While entering into the sufferings of others is not easily experienced, early Baptists believed that it was part of living in union with Christ. Having been drawn together through the death and resurrection of Christ, Christians are to share in life in a unity discovered only in the suffering love of God in Christ.

The idea of suffering 'for and with Christ' as a central tenet of Baptist ecclesiology struck me forcefully many years ago as I read the diary of an eighteenth-century Baptist woman. In the diary she often spoke of the relationships within the congregation. She mentioned conversations she had with people about relationship with Christ, baptism, and times of worship and prayer. Then, on one occasion, when she was away from home and unable to attend worship she wrote in her diary about her inability to meet with other members of the congregation at the communion table and said:

I find the concerns of others goes very near my soul [---] such as I hope have an interest in Christ [---] when I know their temptations their afflictions or their consolations [...] I seem to bear an equal share in either, and how can it be otherwise when I look upon them together with myself as part of the purchase of Christ's suffering and so a part of that real body of whom Christ is the head.²⁷

In reading these words, it struck me that this woman had a clear understanding that union with Christ was not merely a personal union (that is, just a union or communion between the believer and God), but a corporate one. Personal commitment and trust in Christ as Lord and Saviour were important, though union with Christ was not simply an individual experience, but one which united the believer with other believers in the body of Christ, the church.

Sharing in the suffering of Christ and of others as a responsibility of all who are part of a local community of faith is a subject that should demand the attention of Baptists today. While many are drawn to a particular church because of a preference for a particular style of worship, the activities of a church, or the style of preaching, there is a danger of forgetting that our Baptist forbears spoke of being called by God to share in the suffering of Christ. They believed that members of the body of Christ were to give themselves to one another. Of course, while church members may have a special relationship together in Christ, 'shared suffering' is not limited

²⁷ Diary of Anne C. Steele, April 1, 1734, Steele Family Papers, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford. (The brackets inserted are my own.)

simply to members of a fellowship. Members of a community of faith not only serve the needs of one another, but the love of God calls Christians out of their community, too.

Over the years one could note many examples of attempts on the part of Baptists to share in the burdens of others. For example, Robert Robinson, a pastor in Cambridge in the eighteenth century, spoke out in opposition to slavery.²⁸ In a sermon entitled ‘Slavery Inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity’ preached in 1788 at Cambridge, he claimed that the system of a slaveholder was in contrast to the justice of God. While many arguments had been made in favour of slavery, Robinson claimed in no uncertain terms that they could all be reduced to one argument, ‘the gain of it’. ‘What then becomes of justice, justice as the base of the throne of God’, he wrote, ‘if ideas of gain and loss be allowed to supply [sic] the place of notions of right and wrong?’ Urging his hearers to ‘copy the life of Jesus’ he called them to inspire their children with ‘a love of virtuous freedom’ and so conducting themselves in all civil and political debates to stand ‘on the side of liberty . . . of just, equal and universal freedom’.²⁹ More recently, Baptists have shared in the suffering of Christ while witnessing to the love of God in communist controlled countries.³⁰ There are, of course, stories of countless other Baptist women and men who have spoken out on issues of justice and freedom, challenging cultural norms.³¹ Part of a Baptist vision of the church is that those who are united with Christ in suffering will, in obedience to Christ, be seeking to reach out to others and sharing in the suffering of others in the name of Christ wherever they may be. Of course, not everyone in a church will agree on the issues to be addressed. As a church, believers may have agreed ‘to walk together’ in the ways of Christ—‘those ways made known or to be made known unto them’.³² Yet, what were these ways yet to be made known? How were they to give expression to mission? What was required of believers? How was the church to be organised in mission and ministry? Who should lead? In order to discover a vision for ministry and service, Baptists have always insisted that they must ‘seek the mind of Christ’.³³

²⁸ Karen E. Smith, ‘The Liberty Not to be a Christian: Robert Robinson (1735-1790) of Cambridge and Freedom of Conscience’, in Marc A. Jolley with John D. Pierce, eds., *Distinctively Baptist, Essays on Baptist History* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2005), pp. 159-160.

²⁹ Robert Robinson, ‘Slavery Inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity’, a sermon preached at Cambridge, February 10, 1788 in *Miscellaneous Work of Robert Robinson*, Sermon X, Vol. IV (Harlow, England: B. Flower, 1807), p. 78.

³⁰ See especially, Lydie Kucová, ‘Pastors in the Dock: The Political Trials of Baptist Ministers in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s’, in Anthony R. Cross and John H.Y. Briggs, eds., *Freedom and the Powers, Perspectives from Baptist History* (Didcot, UK: The Baptist Historical Society, 2014), pp. 127-145.

³¹ For some twentieth-century examples, see Larry L. McSwain, ed., *Twentieth-Century Shapers of Baptist Social Ethics* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2008).

³² Fiddes, “Walking Together”, p. 47.

³³ For a challenging discussion, see Stephen R. Holmes, ‘Knowing Together the Mind of Christ: Congregational Government and the Church Meeting’, in Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne, eds.,

Seeking the Mind of Christ

‘Seeking the mind of Christ’ for Baptists is about openness to the leadership of Christ. One primary way of doing this is through prayer and in worship. In worship believers join together to hear the word proclaimed, to offer prayers and sing hymns and observe the ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Given the centrality of Scripture for Baptists, it is not surprising that it is primarily through the proclamation of the Word that Baptists believe the mind and will of God is revealed. For early Baptists, the sermon was a medium for ethical, moral and doctrinal instruction and encouragement in the Christian life. Hymn-singing provided a means for personal faith to be given expression in corporate worship. Sometimes days of fasting and prayer were observed. Always though, if a sermon were offered, it was viewed as a time to hear the voice of God and seek the counsel of Christ. Baptist hymn-writer, Anne Steele (1717-1778), reflected on ‘hearing the Saviour’s voice’ and ‘viewing the Saviour’ in the Word in these verses:

Father of mercies, in thy word
what endless glory shines!
For ever be thy name adored
for these celestial lines.

Here, the Redeemer's welcome voice
spreads heavenly peace around,
and life, and everlasting joys
attend the glorious sound.

Divine instructor, gracious Lord,
be now and always near;
teach me to love your sacred word,
and view my Saviour there.³⁴

In addition to worship, of course, for Baptists the church meeting has always been the place for seeking the mind of Christ. Often in contemporary practice, Baptists have treated the church meeting as an expression of individualism and democracy. Yet, as Stephen Holmes has rightly pointed out, ‘the practice of church meetings is not democratic...because the task of all present is not to express a preference, still less to gain a majority, but to discern the mind of Christ’.³⁵ Certainly early Baptists would not have treated church meetings as ‘business’ meetings where finance was to be discussed or the decision of the diaconate ratified. Rather, the church meeting was an obvious expression of communion in Christ. Here decisions about the life of

Questions of Identity, Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes (Oxford, UK: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, Regent’s Park College, 2011), pp. 172-188.

³⁴ Verses 1,4,6 Anne Steele, ‘Father of Mercies’ in *Baptist Praise and Worship* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 143.

³⁵ Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, Doing Theology Series (London: T&T Clark, 2012), p. 102.

the congregation and members were made. Here also the spiritual needs of members were brought to light, and failure to live in accordance with the way of Christ was discussed and addressed. The emphasis on ‘seeking the mind of Christ’ should not be seen merely as a democratic decision-making process by church members. Rather, it is a radical openness to the Spirit. The church meeting in Baptist ecclesiology is a time to come together, to pray together, to listen and to discern what the Spirit of God might be saying to the people who have been gathered by God to be part of the body of Christ, the church.

Discerning the mind of Christ is never a simple process. It is assumed that normally, the will of Christ will be revealed to the whole fellowship meeting together. ‘As the church gathers corporately to hear its Lord’s voice and to commit itself to obey what it has heard.’³⁶ Yet, at times, as in the case of the very first Baptists, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, members of a congregation have trouble agreeing on the leading of the Spirit and may eventually even part ways. It would be impossible to claim that by being open to the Word and Spirit, Baptists have always found agreement as they discerned the mind of Christ. Baptists have differed in opinion and divided over and over across the years. As Bill Leonard has put it:

From the beginning of the movement Baptists have been plagued by schisms, divisions, and intra- and inter-church feuds that have led to new churches, associations, and groups. If each church is free to set its own directions and ministries, then associations and denominations are also free to dismiss those whose ideas and positions differ. While the will of the majority prevail, dissent by individuals or minorities is an ever-present reality. Being Baptist is messy, controversial, and divisive. Like the Gospel.³⁷

Yet, it must be said that ‘seeking the mind Christ’ has also led people to change their views on certain issues or (depending on the issue) to agree to disagree or at least not to let differences of opinion hinder their fellowship in Christ.³⁸

³⁶ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, p. 102.

³⁷ Bill J. Leonard, *The Challenge of Being Baptist, Owning a Scandalous Past and an Uncertain Future* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010), p. 51.

³⁸ This may be seen for example in the covenant of New Road Baptist Church, Oxford, where the members agreed not to let the issue of infant baptism be divisive among them. The covenant states: ‘And whereas some of us do verily believe that the sprinkling of the infant children of believing parents in the name of the FATHER, the SON, and the HOLY SPIRIT, is true Christian Baptism; and others of us do believe that true Christian Baptism is that which is administered to adults upon the profession of their repentance, faith, and experience of the grace of GOD, by Immersion in the Name of the Sacred Three; yet, notwithstanding this difference of sentiment, we promise and agree to receive one another into the same affection and love; and for this, among other many reasons: because we can find no warrant in the Word of GOD to make such difference of sentiment any bar to Communion at the LORD’s Table in particular, or to Church fellowship in general; and because the LORD JESUS receiving and owning them on both sides of the question, we think we ought to do so too’. See ‘Covenant of 1780’ New Road Baptist Church, Oxford, <http://www.newroadbaptistchurchoxford.co.uk/content/pages/documents/1312454439.pdf>, consulted on 08 May 2015.

The Church and the Communion of Saints

Often a discussion of Baptist ecclesiology will focus primarily on the church on earth. Attention is given to church practices, worship, leadership and polity. However, there is another unity within the wider church: the whole communion of saints. Perhaps due to a bias formed out of our roots in the sixteenth century European Reformations, early Baptists did not speak very much about saints. The phrase ‘communion of saints’ is used in the 1644 London Confession and again in the second London Confession, but in both instances, the reference is to the visible church.³⁹ However, in practice, the idea of union in Christ leads to a fuller understanding of what it means to share life together in this world and the next. If there is a unity in Christ, the unity is not broken at death. It changes, but it is not lost. John Fawcett (1740-1817), the eighteenth century hymn-writer and pastor of a Baptist Church at Wainsgate, in Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire for fifty-two years spoke of this unity as a ‘tie that binds’.

Blest be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love;
the fellowship of kindred minds
is like to that above.

Before our Father’s throne,
we pour our ardent prayers;
our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
our comforts, and our cares.

We share our mutual woes,
our mutual burdens bear;
and often for each other flows
the sympathizing tear.

When for a while we part,
this thought will soothe our pain
that we shall still be joined in heart,
and hope to meet again.

This glorious hope revives
our courage by the way,
while each in expectation lives,
and longs to see the day.

From sorrow, toil and pain,
and sin we shall be free;
and perfect love and friendship reign
through all eternity.⁴⁰

³⁹ See the discussion in Haymes et al., *On Being the Church, Revisioning Baptist Identity*, pp. 42-43.

⁴⁰ John Fawcett, ‘Blest be the Tie that Binds’, *Baptist Praise and Worship* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 711.

In the church fellowship of which I am a part in Wales, we still sing the words of this old hymn, often at a funeral of a church member or at the communion table as we remember those of the fellowship who have died. At the communion table as we seek to ‘bear one another’s burdens’ and those of the wider world, there is a real awareness of being joined with those who have gone before us. The tradition in our church is to remember especially those of our fellowship who have died since the last time we shared the Lord’s Supper together. In these moments of worship there is an opportunity for awareness of our unity in God with the whole communion of saints.⁴¹

This understanding of the wider communion of saints is part of a Baptist ecclesiology. If as believers we are bound together ‘in Christ’, then certainly we continue to be ‘joined in heart’ with those who are already part of the church triumphant. Our Baptist vision of the church must never be limited to what we see, organise, and plan or think we control. Our covenant church life now is but one part of a much larger fellowship of believers with whom we share life in God. This eternal communion in Christ is an unbroken fellowship of love.

As Baptists we do not talk a lot about the whole communion of saints. And for some, a discussion of an unbroken communion in the love of God may sound like little more than sentimental emotion. Yet, those who have been gathered by God to participate in the very life of God never stop joining our love energies with all those who exist in the life of God. Through prayer and worship there are moments when we may sense something of this larger community in which we share. Especially at the Lord’s Table, we think of being joined with this much larger community of saints, who already know the fullness of love and even now continue to teach us about the kingdom way. Of course our knowledge and understanding of life in Christ—life in fellowship with God and one another—is only partial now. Yet, central to being Baptist is the insistence that Christians are called to respond to God. We are to give ourselves to God: to abandon ourselves to the love of God in the hope that one day God’s kingdom will be realised on earth, even as it is in heaven. But for now we are to listen, wait, pray, worship and work together as we ‘seek the mind of Christ’.

As Baptists pledge to ‘walk together’ and continue to hold forth the early Baptist vision of community ‘in Christ’, there is of course a very real awareness that any visible gathered community is not the whole. Baptists must go on longing and working for a different kind of community than has been discovered so far. A community called out by God caught up in the very life of God and in God’s love. A fellowship of believers who have been

⁴¹ Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes, and Richard Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints: A Theology of Covenanted Disciples* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2014).

gathered by God, and living under the Lordship of Christ are ‘seeking the mind of Christ’. A community of believers who day by day are ‘walking together’ united in Christ with the whole company of heaven.

Dr Karen E Smith

South Wales Baptist College/ Cardiff University
Cardiff, Wales, UK

The Church: Towards a Common Vision

A Believers Church Response

Teun van der Leer

Abstract: The ecumenical document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (CTCV) challenges churches to reflect on the difference between the ‘believed’ and the ‘experienced’ church. In this article this is done from the perspective of the Believers Church Tradition (BCT). In this (third) ‘type’ the church is constituted through the gathering of believers and comes close to Luther’s third order for ‘those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth’ in his *Deutsche Messe* (1526), which for Luther remained hypothetical. With the end of the *Corpus Christianum* the time might have come for the ‘congregationalization of all Christianity’ (Volf) and CTCV is mainly evaluated here in that light. This gives a strong emphasis on the *fides qua* and a strong warning to all traditions to be aware of a so-called ‘grace plus’, by which is meant an adding of elements to the nature of the church, which causes unnecessary divisions.

Keywords: Ecclesiology, Congregationalization, *fides qua* & *fides quae*, ecumenism of the heart

‘First, let me affirm: The Church of tomorrow cannot but be a Believers’ Church’. With this bold statement the late John Howard Yoder opened his address at the Believers’ Church Study Conference (BCC) in Winnipeg, Canada, on 15 May 1978.¹ This was the fifth of sixteen BCC, beginning in 1967 in Louisville, USA, and for now ending in Winnipeg in 2008. Sixteen conferences with a variety of subjects, organised by a loose network, unified by the desire to articulate the meaning, the relevance and the potential of the Believers’ Church Tradition (BCT).²

¹ ‘The Believers’ Church: Global Perspectives’, in Jarold K. Zeman, Walter Klaassen and John D. Rempel, eds. *The Believers’ Church in Canada: Addresses and Papers from the Study Conference in Winnipeg, May 15-18, 1978* (Brantford, Ont.: Mennonite Publ. Service, 1979), p. 3.

² I do not use an apostrophe—as many do—after ‘Believers’ in Believers’ Church. Donald Durnbaugh defends it by saying that it emphasises ‘the communal and collective quality of belief, in opposition to the individual alone’ in Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church. The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2003, 1968), p. 7. Although I share this viewpoint, I take it for granted and leave out the apostrophe, since it suggests—wrongly—that the church is owned by the believers. A *Believers Church* is and remains a church of Christ. To quote Frank H. Littell: ‘Believers’ Church’ does not mean that the church belongs to the members; it means that the members belong to Christ’, see his ‘The Concept of the Believers’ Church’, in: James Leo Garrett Jr. (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers’ Church: Addresses from the 1967 Louisville Conference* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1969), p. 28. In quotations I shall keep the apostrophe.

This article will look at that potential with an eye on the ecumenical document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (CTCV).³ After a short introduction to the BCT and the sixteen Believers' Church Conferences (BCC), a response to CTCV from the Believers Church (BC) perspective will be given. The word 'perspective' here is used in the light of James McClendon's hermeneutic of convictional perspectivism, which tries to avoid both the traps of 'imperialism' (only this tradition is valid and true) and 'relativism' (anything goes).⁴

The Believers Church Tradition

It was just a year after the first BCC in 1967 that Donald Durnbaugh, who was a member of the planning and the findings committees of that conference, published his *The Believers' Church*, in which he tries to define the concept of the BC and sketch its history and character. Durnbaugh starts with Martin Luther's interesting so-called 'third order' in his *Deutsche Messe* (1526), where Luther talks about 'those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth (...) Here one could...center everything on the Word, prayer, and love'.⁵

In an article, also in 1967, George Williams⁶ shows that this—as he calls it—'community of covenant' was in fact highly hypothetical for Luther, since he feared the danger of revolt in so radical a programme, characterising his own people as 'an untamed, crude, boisterous folk'.⁷ However, in the same paragraph, Luther declared himself prepared to take the step if circumstances should ever prove propitious and he could make the break 'with a good conscience'.⁸ So there might be a relationship between his 'third order' and the so-called 'third stream' that we will talk about in this

³ *The Church—Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC-Publications, 2013); from now on abbreviated as CTCV.

⁴ James Wm. McClendon, Jr., and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, (rev. ed., Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994; originally published as *Understanding Religious Convictions* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975], chs. 6 and 7); cf. Parush R. Parushev, 'Convictional Perspectivism: A Constructive Proposal for a Theological Response to Postmodern Conditions', in John Currie and Cathy Ross, eds., *Mission in Context: Explorations Inspired by Andrew Kirk* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 111-124 and Joshua T. Searle, 'The Ecumenical Imperative and the Kingdom of God: Towards a Baptist Perspective on Church Unity', *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 14:1 (September 2013), pp. 5-23.

⁵ 'Diejenigen, die mit Ernst Christen sein wollen und das Evangelium mit Hand und Mund bekennen (...) Hier könnte man auch...alles auf das Wort und Gebet und die Liebe ausrichten'. Martin Luther in his 'Vorrede zu: Deutsche Messe und Ordnung Gottesdiensts 1526', in Karin Bornkamm und Gerhard Ebeling, *Martin Luther Ausgewählte Schriften Fünfter Band* (Frankfurt, Germany: Insel Verlag, 1983), p. 77.

⁶ George Hunton Williams, "'Congregationalist" Luther and the Free Churches', *Lutheran Quarterly* XIX (1967), pp. 283-295.

⁷ 'Denn wir Deutschen sin dein wildes, rohes, wahnsinniges Volk, mit dem nicht leicht etwas anzufangen ist, wenn es nicht die höchste Not dazu treibt', Bornkamm & Ebeling, *Martin Luther*, p. 78.

⁸ 'Kommt es aber dazu, dass ich's tun muss und dazu gezwungen werde, do dass ich es aus gutem Gewissen nicht unterlassen kann, so will ich das Meine gern dazu tun und, so gut ich es vermag, helfen', Bornkamm & Ebeling, *Martin Luther*, p. 78.

article. The BCT is, as a specific form of congregationalism, part of the so-called ‘third stream’ or ‘type’, named ‘sect’ by Troeltsch,⁹ ‘Pentecostal’ by Lesslie Newbigin,¹⁰ and ‘baptist’ (with a small ‘b’) by McClendon.¹¹ Durnbaugh himself defines the BC as ‘the covenanted and disciplined community of those walking in the way of Jesus Christ’.¹²

The Believers Church Conferences

What stands out when you look at the conferences is a focus on the rediscovery of ‘the biblical church’. In a ‘Letter to the churches’ from a ‘pre-conference’ in 1955 by the *General Conference Mennonite Church* from Kansas, USA,¹³ four things were stated about the biblical church, saying that (1) it is composed of those who have voluntarily accepted Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and have committed their lives to Him; (2) it is a fellowship of brotherly love and discipline controlled by the Holy Spirit; (3) its authority lies in the Scriptures seen particularly in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ; and (4) it reveals itself as a missionary church with each believer as an active witness. This sounds quite demanding and it therefore comes not as a surprise when at the same time it is said that ‘this church has not been sufficiently realised’.¹⁴

⁹ In 1912 he wrote his *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* with the famous sociological threefold typology of church-sect-mysticism, in which he defines sect with these words: ‘Verhältnismässig kleine Gruppen, erstreben eine persönlich-innerliche Durchbildung und eine persönlich-unmittelbare Verknüpfung der Glieder ihres Kreises, verhalten sich gegen Welt, Staat, Gesellschaft indifferent, duldend oder feindlich’. Quoted from ‘Gesammelte Schriften’, Band 1 (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1922, 3rd edition 1977), p. 362. Robert Friedman says about this: ‘It was a great step forward when Ernst Troeltsch first so clearly distinguished church and sect—although primarily from a sociological point of view. Church is the institution of salvation for all baptised members; sect is the brotherhood of the regenerate, the congregation of saints, a gathered church of true Christians either for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper alone or for a collective life according to the Sermon on the Mount’, in: *Hutterite Studies* (Goshen, Ind.: Mennonite Press, 1961), p. 6.

¹⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), p. 9.

¹¹ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (1986, 2nd rev. ed. 2002), *Doctrine* (1994) and *Witness* (2000) (Nashville, Tenn.: Abington Press). See especially the first chapter of *Ethics*. For a summary of his ecclesiology, see René Erwich, ‘De ecclesiologie van James McClendon Jr. Baptisten ecclesiologie met een kleine ‘b’ *Soteria* 22:4 (dec. 2005), pp. 55-64.

¹² Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church*, p. 33. Partly building on Durnbaugh I summed up six characteristics of the BC in Teun van der Leer, ‘Which future Church (form)? A plea for a “Believers Church” ecclesiology’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 9:3 (May 2009), pp. 40-51, as (1) regenerated membership, (2) community/brotherhood, (3) discipleship and discipline, (4) egalitarian and congregational, (5) primitivism and Biblicism and (6) mission and service. In one way or another, these characteristics return again and again in the papers of the conferences and in the broader literature from the BCT.

¹³ *Proceedings of the Study Conference on the Believers’ Church. Held at Mennonite Biblical Seminary Chicago, Illinois, August 23-25, 1955* (Newton, Kans.: General Conference Mennonite Church, 1956).

¹⁴ *Proceedings*, p. 6.

It is the tension between the ‘Believed Church’ and the ‘Experienced Church’, as Fernando Enns called it at the 16th conference¹⁵ that runs through all these conference papers. There is not only a constant search for ‘what is exactly a BC [Believed Church]’, but even more for ‘how will it be realised’. In other words: it is not yet clear what a BC is and it inherently will never be. It belongs to its nature that it is and remains a *concept* and this concept, Yoder says, ‘is a type *sui generis*, which (...) keeps arising again and again, in every century, taking on similar shapes, *mutatis mutandis*. The differences within the similarities, and the similarities amidst the differences, constitute the common agenda joining the historian’s and the theologian’s agenda’.¹⁶

This last sentence is important when it comes to methodology. It corresponds to what Edward Schillebeeckx says about the church as one single reality in history, but one that must be understood in two irreducible languages.¹⁷ Theological language describes the church in its relation to God; critical-historical-sociological language accounts for the church insofar as it is continuous with other historical institutions. Roger Haight, quoting Schillebeeckx in his recent trilogy on historical and comparative ecclesiology, stresses that there are not two churches, but two dimensions of one reality: ‘We need a theological method that respects these two dimensions of the one church, that does not hold them in balance over against each other but integrates them in a single understanding’.¹⁸ He discerns between an ecclesiology from above—aiming at defining the essential nature and structure of the church that transcends any given context—and an ecclesiology from below, for which the primary object of ecclesiology is the visible or empirical church. There will always be a fruitful tension between the ideal and the real in ecclesiology according to Haight,¹⁹ or, to refer again to Enns between the ‘believed’ and the ‘experienced’ church.

The Church—Towards a Common Vision: Some Critical Remarks

Now considering the recent document *The Church—Towards a Common Vision* (CTCV) of the WCC,²⁰ the tension between the ‘Believed Church’

¹⁵ Fernando Enns, ‘Believers Church Ecclesiology: A Vital Alternative within the Ecumenical Family’, in Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder & Karl Koop, eds., *New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology* (Winnipeg, Man.: CMU Press, 2010), p. 108.

¹⁶ John H. Yoder, ‘The Believers’ Church Conferences in Historical Perspective’, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65 (Jan. 1991), p. 12.

¹⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), pp. 210–213.

¹⁸ Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History, Vol. 1* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 2004), p. 39.

¹⁸ Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History, Vol. 1* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 2004), p. 39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁰ WCC, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC-Publications, 2013), a pdf copy available on <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>, accessed 06 May 2015.

and the ‘Experienced Church’ can also easily be found there. Right from the start it talks about the Lord’s will for the church to be one (Believed Church) which it is clearly not (Experienced Church). ‘The present text’ it says, ‘addresses what many consider to be the most difficult issues facing the churches in overcoming any remaining obstacles to their living out the Lord’s gift of communion: our understanding of the nature of the Church itself’.²¹

This is and remains the key question in the ecumenical ecclesiological debate: How can we identify the Church?! According to the BCT the church is neither constituted by the office, nor by the (pure preaching of) the Word, but by the gathering of believers called by Christ through his Spirit. In his keynote address to the first BCC in 1967 in Louisville, Frank Littell said that ‘the church consists of those who are personally claimed by Christ, and without that relationship *there is no church*, however impressive the outward show’ (my italics).²²

The CTCV seems to limp on two thoughts here. On the one hand it talks about ‘the communion of believers held in personal relationship with God’ (par. 34) and about faith in Christ as ‘fundamental to membership of the body’ (par. 21), but on the other hand it says that ‘human beings come to saving faith *and, by sacramental means*, are incorporated into the body of Christ’ (par. 14, my italics). Faith seems to be constitutive, but at the same time it needs to be expressed or embodied in the sacraments, and for sacraments the ministry is needed, and ministry needs some form of ordination in some line of succession, and for that we need certain liturgical formulations that we use in a church service that we hold in a church building that needs to have a certain architecture and we write it all down in a certain Church order...

What happens here is a so-called ‘thickening’ of the church. We add and we add and we add and in the end we only see what was added and think that this is what makes the church. This causes a certain ambivalence that runs through the whole report, and in fact through the whole ecumenical discourse.

Especially the eucharist is given an emphasis that seems to stand at odds with the New Testament. For example already in the Introduction where it is stated that ‘such visible unity’ (meaning ‘common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world so that the world may believe’) ‘finds a most eloquent expression in the celebration of the eucharist, which glorifies the

²¹ *The Church—Towards a Common Vision*, p. 1.

²² F.H. Littell, ‘The Concept of the Believers’ Church’, in: James Leo Garrett Jr. (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers’ Church: Addresses from the 1967 Louisville Conference* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1969), p. 28.

Triune God and enables the Church to participate in the mission of God for the transformation and salvation of the world'.²³ Without any biblical evidence the eucharist is named the most eloquent expression of the visible unity of the Church.

Even more telling is the moment that the text refers to the Great Commission in Matt. 28, and concludes from Jesus' words that the church 'was to be a community of discipleship, in which the apostles, by proclaiming the Word, baptising *and celebrating the Lord's Supper*, were to guide new believers to observe all that Jesus himself had commanded'.²⁴ But Matthew 28 does not speak about the Lord's Supper at all...

When talking about the ministry, it comes back in a similar way. Look at how the later developments in church history—apostolic succession, *episkopé*, Eucharist—are read here into (again) Matthew 28:

Having received from his Father "full authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18), Jesus shared his authority with the apostles (cf. John 20:22). Their successors in the ministry of oversight (*episkopé*) exercised authority in the proclamation of the gospel, *in the celebration of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist* [neither mentioned in Matt. 28, nor in John 20!], and in the pastoral guidance of believers (par. 48).²⁵

It is this line of thinking that in CTCV results in calling faith *as well as* sacraments and ministry the essential elements of communion (Chapter III.B). And it is easy to see what causes the most trouble: on faith two paragraphs follow, on the sacraments five and on the ministry thirteen. If quantity has ecumenical significance, one might think that ministry is the most important issue in ecclesiology, far more than faith. Although this quantity can also be viewed the other way around: when it comes to the sacraments and even more to the ministry we are still far from an ecumenical consensus, but when it comes to faith we are almost there!²⁶

But whatever the sequence is, we should look critically at the combination of the three on the same level. In his book on the church, Jannes Reiling discerns between the foundation, which is Jesus Christ alone (1 Cor. 3:11), and the 'second floor' with all the unavoidable, but fully alterable institutional forms and structures. In that light he talks about the necessity of a real *kenosis* in the ecumenical debate:

In that *kenosis* every church shall have to take along her own forms and traditions, however old or holy, and then it shall appear whether the Holy Spirit still wants to use them or that they should be abolished. (...) We have to be

²³ CTCV, p. 2.

²⁴ CTCV, p. 4, my italics.

²⁵ CTCV, p. 27, italics and comments in square brackets are mine.

²⁶ With gratitude to my VU-colleague, Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit, for this viewpoint during a discussion at the faculty on CTCV.

ready to take down to the foundation all of our traditional buildings, so there will be room for the rebuilding of “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22, RSV 1952).²⁷

Here is a good mirror—as Nigel Wright calls it—to look into by both the catholic (with a small c) and the baptist (with a small b) traditions.²⁸ We should not, for example, exclude the possibility that ‘our’ (the Baptists) believers baptism by immersion is part of the ‘second floor’. It is quite easy to say that the others have to sacrifice their bishops and their infant baptism and their Church orders and so on, but what about our ‘holy’ traditions? We baptise, for example, in a church building in *warm* water! Is that not a form of ‘thickening’? In the Netherlands, for example, in 1867 it led to a schism within the church of Stadskanaal when a wooden baptistery was built and filled with warm water and used for baptisms in a farmer’s barn. Some brothers accused the minister of what they called ‘Churchianity’ (not meant as a compliment!); moreover it went from bad to worse when a church was built and the baptistery was laid with bricks on the inside. For them this was the beginning of the end.²⁹ We might laugh about this today, but we must understand that it is very easy to form traditions around the way we baptise, or how we fill in our services, celebrate the Lord’s Supper, ordain (or do not ordain) our ministers, sing, praise, dance (or don’t dance), etc.

The Ecumenical Challenge

So what is the ecumenical challenge for the BCT in light of CTCV and vice versa? First of all, let us look more closely at the hermeneutical question and the use of Scripture and Tradition.

At first appearance it seems that you could say that the BCT looks at Tradition (by which here is meant the reception of the Bible and the development of doctrine) through the ‘eyes’ of Scripture, while CTCV looks at Scripture through the ‘eyes’ of Tradition.³⁰ In par. 11 it says that

²⁷ My translation from: ‘In die kenosis zal iedere kerk haar eigen vormen en tradities mee op moeten nemen, ook al zijn ze nog zo geheiligd en oud, en het zal dan wel blijken of de Heilige Geest ze gebruikten kan of ze moet afschaffen. (...) We zullen bereid moeten zijn onze kerkelijke en gemeentelijke gebouwen tot op dit fundament te laten afbreken, opdat er ruimte is voor de nieuwbouw van een “woonhuis van God in de Geest”. (Ef. 2:22)’ in: J. Reiling, *Gemeenschap der heiligen: Over de gemeente van Jezus Christus naar het Nieuwe Testament* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Ten Have, 1964), pp. 152, 153.

²⁸ Nigel W. Wright, *Free Church, Free State. The Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), pp. xxiii-xxv.

²⁹ Dr. G.A. Wumkes, *De opkomst en vestiging van het baptisme in Nederland* (Sneek, The Netherlands: A.J. Osinga, 1912), pp. 139-141.

³⁰ This of course is a bit of a caricature, but it is used here to sharpen the differences for clarity. I am aware that ‘Tradition’ is not a unified concept, as Octavian Baban rightly mentions in ‘Four Views and a Response on WCC Church Vision’ in *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 15.2 (January, 2015), pp. 34-45: ‘The relation between Scripture and Tradition is a very nuanced, a complex one, approached differently by various churches: the all-inclusive Tradition that includes the Scripture; the two linked bodies, Scripture and Tradition; Scripture as normative; and apostolic Tradition versus Tradition as later and non-apostolic tradition, etc.’ (p. 41).

the same Holy Spirit who guided the earliest communities in producing the inspired biblical text continues, from generation to generation, to guide later followers of Jesus as they strive to be faithful to the Gospel. This is what is understood by the “living Tradition” of the Church.³¹

In a footnote explanation it quotes affirmatively from the Montreal statement of the fourth World Conference on Faith and Order on ‘Scripture, Tradition and Traditions’ (1963), which points out that ‘by *the Tradition* is meant the gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ Himself present in the life of the Church’.³²

Now *sola Scriptura* will not suffice to resolve this difference, for no one within the BCT reads Scripture ‘pure’, but always through the ‘spectacles’ of its tradition and its context; neither does CTCV place history above Scripture. We need both, and so the difference is mainly in the emphasis, and if the BCT prefers to use the New Testament scriptures as a critical corrective of the empirical church, it should be clear that this corrective is needed *both* towards the ‘catholic’ as well as towards the ‘baptist’ tradition.

For example, when Baptists criticise CTCV for adding the sacraments (and the ministry) to faith as the essentials of ecclesiology, they themselves should ask the question whether their demand for baptism as a requirement for membership has also become a form of ‘thickening’, or what in light of the *sola gratia* of the Reformation can be called a ‘grace plus’. Especially in so-called closed membership churches it looks as though being saved by grace through faith is not enough for belonging to the (local) body of Christ. Does this mean that (‘our’) baptism is necessary for salvation? And if it is not, on what basis do we discern between—to quote John Bunyan—‘the righteous and the righteous’³³? Is it possible that the baptism of the BCT becomes a plus? And is not that something familiar to faith plus Eucharist and/or ministry?

There is a difference, though, in emphasis between the BCT and CTCV when it comes to faith and this is the difference between the *fides qua* and the *fides quae*. Although CTCV talks about a ‘personal relationship with God’ (par. 34), the emphasis is on the *fides quae*, as is seen in the Faith and Order Study Document ‘Confessing the One Faith’ (1991), to which CTCV

³¹ CTCV, p. 9.

³² Ibid., cited from P. C. Roger and L. Vischer (eds.), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: Montreal 1963* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 50.

³³ John Bunyan, ‘Differences in Judgment about Water-Baptism, no Bar to Communion’ (1673), in: Roger Sharrock (ed.), *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan* Vol. IV, ed. by T.L. Underwood (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 220: ‘I will not let Water-baptism be the Rule, the Door, the Bolt, the Bar, the Wall of Division between the Righteous & the Righteous’.

refers.³⁴ What BC always will point to is that ‘outer’ faith should correspond to ‘inner’ faith. Faith is more than accepting or affirming certain truths or confessions; it is, to quote the famous words of John Wesley, ‘the heart strangely warmed’,³⁵ which led to the evangelical emphasis on convertive piety, framed by Donald Dayton³⁶ and taken up by Stanley Grenz, who talks about the shift from the ‘objective’ to the ‘subjective’³⁷ and emphasises with Olson that ‘true Christian piety (...) begins with a distinct conversion experience not identical with [infant] baptism’.³⁸

This means that the BCT thinking and talking about ecumenism, will always value most the ‘ecumenism of the heart’. At the same time it is good to remember what McClendon wrote on conversionist spirituality, explaining how transformation only has meaning against a formationist background.³⁹ So we will always need a form of the church that will nurture *both* formation and transformation, since what is ‘new’ today, may be ‘old’ tomorrow and will need refreshment again, the so-called clapper between church and movement that Olof de Vries talks about.⁴⁰

The Future

At the creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 Karl Barth wrote: ‘It is obvious that the last remnants of sovereign authority in the idea of a *corpus christianum* are disappearing; this suggests that we should now look in this other (Congregationalist) direction’.⁴¹ A lot has happened since (think of the work of Littell, Newbigin, Hans Küng, Jürgen Moltmann, Yoder, McClendon, Stanley Hauerwas, Miroslav Volf and many others) and

³⁴ *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as It Is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*, Faith and Order Paper No. 153 (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC-Publications, 1991). Quotation in CTCV on p. 4.

³⁵ On May 24, 1738, Wesley wrote in his Journal: ‘In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death’, http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/Wesley_Journal.pdf, p. 36, accessed on 09 April 2015.

³⁶ Donald W. Dayton, ‘The Limits of Evangelicalism’, in Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston, eds., *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, Mich.: InterVarsity, 1991), p. 48.

³⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2000), pp. 42-43.

³⁸ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, Mich.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 593.

³⁹ James Wm. McClendon, ‘Toward a Conversionist Spirituality’, in Gary A. Furr and Curtis W. Freeman, eds., *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Publ., 1994), pp. 23-32.

⁴⁰ O. H. de Vries, *De dynamiek tussen traditionele kerk en opwekkingsbeweging* (Universiteit Utrecht, 1994). Also in his *Gelovig gedoopt. 400 jaar baptisme, 150 jaar in Nederland* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok, 2009).

⁴¹ Karl Barth, ‘The Church – the Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ’, in his *Man’s Disorder and God’s Design*, The Amsterdam Assembly Series, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 76.

Volf might be right when he writes that ‘today’s global developments seem to imply that Protestant Christendom of the future will exhibit largely a Free Christian form’ and ‘that we are standing in the middle of a clear and irreversible “process of congregationalization” of all Christianity’.⁴²

A closer look at Luther and his third order and its relationship to the third (BC) stream might therefore be very helpful *in light of the ecumenical discourse*. Although Luther cannot be claimed retroactively for the BCT, his thoughts on the third order can still build bridges, as George Williams shows in his earlier mentioned article that they were not that alien within the whole body of Luthers work. The way Williams summarises them and draws his conclusions, challenges both ‘catholics’, ‘protestants’ and ‘pentecostals’.⁴³

To both the older and the latter-day free churches Luther can speak as an “ecumenical” and pertinent “congregationalist”. (...) The wonderful thing about Luther's third form for the church was that it was never thought of by him as anything like a come-outers’ church. So many a believers’ church has, alas, been also a leavers’ church. Luther's third form of the church, the house church of the spiritual neighborhood, the fellowship of earnest Christians, the kinship of the reborn, would be bound together with all by the covenant of a good conscience, sustained by the plenitude of Christ’s grace, and ordered by the duties and privileges of a heavenly citizenship. But it would not be a separatist conventicle. It would be an association in which participants should gain mutual strength in prayer and praise and mutual counsel to withdraw and serve in the larger city. His third form of the church was centripetal in order to be centrifugal in fulfilling vocations in the world. It was a gathering prepared for diffusion in society at large. (...) In Luther’s vision such an evangelical congregation of elective affinity could take for granted the folk church of the *corpus christianum* wherever this should remain intact. (...) Luther today would probably not coercively maintain the relics of Christendom wherever they had lost their substance and popular support... (...) Luther’s endorsement of neo-congregationalism would today not only presuppose both the universal and the territorial church or comprehensive communion, but also probably require that, risking all for the reality of Christ in the lives of men, we ought no longer to be satisfied with the cultivation of *ecclesiolae* or house churches with the “given churches” (Catholic and Protestant) and the recovery thereof in the long since gathered churches (Mennonite, Congregationalist, Baptist, Christian-Disciples, etc.) which have lost much of the face-to-face fellowship of pristine congregationalism. Indeed his endorsement would no doubt urge that we should venture many new forms of Christian togetherness amid today’s complex urbanization. (...) Today the church is redemptive in the measure that it is locally a true congregation (*Gemeinde*), an accepting, healing, mutually supporting community. It can be that only if it becomes “as a city” with many

⁴² Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 13.

⁴³ Newbigin’s tripartite division in his *The Household of God*.

house churches. Accordingly, Roman Catholics with their vast geographical parishes and multiple Masses, (...) free churches that are rigoristically separatist (...) and Lutherans themselves, who in general would not think of their founder as a “Congregationalist”, can all look back to the great Reformer on the occasion of his more intimate reflections in a “congregational” mood and find there a resource for a risking and radical renewal of urban and suburban Christianity that does not abandon the local parish and its edifice but reconceives their mission and mandate on the model both of the upper room in old Jerusalem at Pentecost and of the “house” church in Luther’s unfinished dream of a Wittenberg “without tumult”.⁴⁴

Drs Teun van der Leer
Rector Dutch Baptist Seminary
VU-University Amsterdam

⁴⁴ Williams, “’ Congregationalist” Luther and the Free Churches’, pp. 292-294.

‘The Word of God in the Life of the Church’: A Traveller’s Guide—Background, Broader Perspectives and Challenges

Tony Peck

Abstract: The paper presents a Baptist participant’s reflection on major theological themes contained in the 2013 Report of theological Conversations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance. The key elements of the Report are outlined with areas of convergence and divergence explored further. Also discussed are the differing ecclesiologies that give rise to very different methodologies in defining doctrine in the two traditions, and how these were handled in the Conversations. The Report is set in the context of other theological dialogues involving Baptists and Roman Catholics, as well. The article explores also changing attitudes towards Roman Catholics by Baptists.

Key Words: Roman Catholic, Baptist, doctrine, ecclesiology, ecumenical

1. Background

This paper is to reflect on the Report of the Theological Conversations held between the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) and the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council of Promoting Christian Unity, from 2006-2010, of which I was privileged to be a member.¹ From 2011-2013 there was a period of ‘reception’ of the Report on both sides and it was finally published in the summer of 2013 as an edition of the *American Baptist Quarterly*.² There are two commentaries by Latin American and British Baptist theologians, Josué Fonseca and Stephen Holmes. Since then the BWA has published the text of the Report as an e-book available on Amazon, though without the helpful commentaries.³

¹ This paper is based on two opportunities I had to introduce the Final Report of these Conversations, at the Doctrine and Unity Commission of the Baptist World Alliance in 2011, and at the Conference of the Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools in 2014. It is a personal reflection and should be read alongside the Report itself, which can be purchased as an e-book on Amazon. It can also be accessed free on the website of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/Bapstist%20alliance/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20101213_report-2006-2010_en.html, consulted on 08 May 2015.

² *American Baptist Quarterly*, Volume XXXI, Number 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 28-122.

³ *The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, 2006-2010* (Falls Church, Va.: Baptist World Alliance, 2013, Kindle Edition).

It also appears on the website of the Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity together with a commentary by a Catholic⁴ theologian, Thomas Baima.⁵ It should be noted that the *status* of the Report is as ‘a study document produced by participants in the Conversations’, and is not to be seen as ‘an authoritative declaration of either the Catholic Church or of the BWA’.⁶ I think that this reflects a certain amount of nervousness on both sides about making it any sort of ‘Final Report’.

There was a previous round of Conversations between the two bodies from 1984-88, which produced a much less substantial but more wide-ranging Report entitled *Summons to Witness to Christ in Today’s World*.⁷ This report registered agreement about the person and work of Christ and therefore provided the Christological basis for the later conversations on *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*.

Discussion of our witness to Christ has revealed that our two communions are one in their confession of Jesus Christ as Son of God, Lord and Saviour. The faith in Christ proclaimed in the New Testament and expressed in the first four ecumenical councils is shared by both of our churches. Our discussion uncovered no significant differences with regard to the person and work of Christ, although some did appear with regard to the appropriation of Christ’s saving work. We believe that this communion of faith in Christ should be stressed and rejoiced in as a basis for our discussions of other areas of church doctrine and life, where serious differences may remain. (*11)⁸

We therefore took up the challenge to tackle some of these ‘other areas’, ecclesiology, Scripture and Tradition, the sacraments/ordinances, the place of Mary, and the nature of *episcopate* and ministry.

The group met for one week during Advent over a period of five years. The Co-Chairs were Bishop Arthur Satorelli from New Jersey for the Catholics and Professor Paul S. Fiddes from Oxford University for the Baptists. The Baptist delegation contained representatives from every continent.

⁴ In common with other ecumenical documents, I have adopted ‘Catholic Church’ and ‘Catholics’ to refer to the Roman Catholic Church.

⁵ The Report can also be accessed at:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/Bapstist%20alliance/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20130401_commentary-baima_en.html, consulted on 08 May 2015.

⁶ *American Baptist Quarterly*, Volume XXXI, Number 1 (Spring 2012), p. 29; cf. ‘The Status of this Report’ section of the document on

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/Bapstist%20alliance/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20101213_report-2006-2010_en.html, consulted on 08 May 2015.

⁷ This Report can be accessed at:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/Bapstist%20alliance/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19880723_baptist-convers_en.html, consulted on 08 May 2015.

⁸ Ibid. Here and elsewhere the symbol (*xx) refers to the numbered paragraphs of the respective report.

The experience of being together as Baptists and Catholics was a very positive one. It was characterised by mutual respect, friendship, and a real sense of *koinonia* that grew out of the daily prayer and listening to Scripture that framed each of our days of Conversations. It was noticeable that as time went on and trust grew between us, we were able to share more confidently and openly the areas of continuing difference between us, as well allowing ourselves to be surprised at some unexpected areas of convergence. Misunderstanding and sometimes even misrepresentations of one another's positions on key areas of theology and doctrine sometimes gave way to a deeper understanding and a more nuanced view of one another's convictions. In all this we believe that though as Baptist conversation partners we were drawn from all over the world and represented the diversity of Baptist life and outlook, nevertheless we remained true to our fundamental Baptist identity and convictions, whilst opening up a space to the insights of the Roman Catholic 'other' who is different from us.

However, in our Conversations we were acutely aware that for some Baptists, especially those in Latin America, the very fact of having Conversations with the Roman Catholic Church at all caused some disquiet. We were grateful for the assurance given to the 2006 BWA Council that Baptist leaders in Latin America understood the reasons for these Conversations and could give their approval to them taking place. Latin America and indeed other Catholic majority nations and regions were well represented in the Baptists' delegation. We hope that as a whole group, and especially in the preparing of this Report, we were properly aware of the sensitivities around these Conversations in some parts of the world.

We do believe, and claim in both the Introduction and the Conclusion, that this is the most sustained attempt 'to identify as accurately as possible convergence and divergence between Catholic and Baptist Christians'⁹ on some key theological issues. In fact the whole document is a piece of sustained theology, and we hope it will be read, understood and interpreted as such.

At one of our sessions in Rome we had a meeting with His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. In his speech on that occasion he said that: 'If our hope for reconciliation and greater fellowship between Baptists and Catholics is to be realised, issues such as these need to be faced together, in a spirit of openness, mutual respect and fidelity to the liberating truth and saving power of the Gospel of Christ'.¹⁰

One of the goals of the Conversations set out in the Report's Introduction is to 'foster a shared life of discipleship within the communion

⁹ See 'Preface' of *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*.

¹⁰ See 'Appendix 1' of *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*.

of the triune God’ (*1-2) which perhaps sums up the spiritual context of our coming together and of our hopes for this Report: that our theological discussions will give rise to a greater shared sense of following Christ in the church and the world. We modelled this in our Conversations by having a time of worship and prayer together at the beginning and the end of each working day.

One goal which we had originally set ourselves remained unfulfilled. Time did not permit us to address directly challenges in ethics of mission and evangelism that face our two Communions today. We had to focus on the theological and doctrinal issues. That is an important task to take up in a follow-up to these Conversations, especially as some Baptists in Europe find common understandings of some of these issues with Roman Catholics. Other Baptists in countries characterised by an overwhelming Catholic context find it a challenging culture in which to live as minority free churches. They tend to define themselves theologically, ethically, and even politically as being distinct from the Roman Catholic Church on some of these issues. From what we heard when we were joined for a couple of our meetings by an Italian Baptist, this would be true of the situation in Italy.

To quote a few sentences from our conclusion which sum up our hopes for the reception of the Report:

We commend this report to our two communions of faith for thoughtful and prayerful reflection. We have tackled issues that deeply affect our respective senses of identity, and we realise that parts of this report may be challenging to our fellow church members. We hope then that it will result in further conversations between and within each of our communions in which the report will be read with patience, sympathy and charity rather than suspicion. (*217)

I want to make some other comments by way of introduction. These Conversations reminded us that both of our traditions, Catholic and Baptist, are not fixed and static. There is theological movement and development in each of them. With the Catholics it is perhaps easier to see this clearly in the changes in theology and practice brought about by the deliberations in the Second Vatican Council and the documents that ensued from it. With Baptists it can seem more spasmodic and fragmented, but nevertheless there are theological developments among us, as well a renewed interest in examining our own roots and early Confessions of Faith. However, we have no ‘*magisterium*’ for defining doctrine beyond the local church and sometimes the national Union. This meant that whilst the Catholic members of the Conversations each sat round the table with a copy of the Vatican II documents and the Catholic Catechism, they had to get used to us saying from our side: “Some Baptists believe this... but others...” In such a context

we often found ourselves gently challenging one another about the previous assumptions we had of one another.

But also, we found ourselves challenged as the Baptist group when a view was being put forward by one of the Baptists with which we could not all agree. This led to some lively debates among us. An example would be the more or less sacramental views of baptism and the Lord's Supper, symbolised by whether we prefer the term 'sacrament' or 'ordinance' to describe what we are doing. You will see that we did not manage to resolve this between us, so opted for the term sacrament/ordinance!

My final comment is about language. Both sides found that sometimes ideas were presented to them in language that was unfamiliar to them and might be unhelpful to their communities. Nevertheless we tried to persist in understanding the ideas behind the language used, and often found that there was something there with which we could agree, even though we might have expressed it differently. Some of that is reflected in the Report.

2. Overall Structure of the Report

Let me now indicate something of the overall structure and methodology of the Report.

First of all I mention one of those broader perspectives that informed our work, the wider ecumenical context of our discussions. There have been other Conversations and Dialogues over the past forty years or so, both between Baptists and others, and Roman Catholics and others. All of us who delivered papers to these Conversations were encouraged to take account of these and especially where theological breakthroughs had occurred.

There is a useful opening article to the Report written by Paul Fiddes that draws out the relevance to our work of some of the bilateral ecumenical Dialogues and Conversations which have taken place over the past twenty or more years between our two communions and other denominations.¹¹ Let me give you a few examples. Both Catholics and the Baptist World Alliance have had theological dialogues with the Reformed Churches, and this provided a useful reference point as the Reformed are perhaps closest to Baptists in theology.¹² Another important agreement in the background was

¹¹ Paul S. Fiddes, 'A Conversation in Context: An Introduction to the Report, *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*', *American Baptist Quarterly*, Volume XXXI, Number 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 7-27.

¹² *Baptists and Reformed in Dialogue: Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches: Documents from the Conversations Sponsored by the Baptist World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Baptist World Alliance 1973-1977* (Falls Church, Va.: Baptist World Alliance, 2013, Kindle Edition).

the Joint Declaration of Justification between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (1999).¹³

One of the most recent series of published conversations was between the BWA and the Anglican churches worldwide from 2000-2005.¹⁴ It was here that Baptists drew on the thinking of Paul Fiddes to propose the idea of a common ‘process of initiation’ in response to the growing ecumenical consensus on unity around the notion of ‘our common baptism’, something that Baptists find problematic. This work done with the Anglicans became a significant contribution to the Conversations with the Catholics regarding baptism and Christian initiation.

We were also aware of some very good work done by individual Baptist Unions, especially French Baptists, in theological dialogue with Roman Catholics. And the then head of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kaspar, met with us and provided us with a copy of his reflections of forty years of Roman Catholic Dialogue with other Christian traditions, *Harvesting the Fruits*.¹⁵ This, then, was the wider ecumenical context that formed an important reference point to our Conversations.

As to methodology for writing the Report, we adopted a convention that has been used in other ecumenical dialogues. At the beginning of each numbered section there is a sentence or short paragraph in bold type. This represents a statement of convergence between the Baptist and Roman Catholic delegations. What follow in ordinary type is both a further expansion of the consensus and also important points of continuing divergence where they occur. These are integrated rather than separated out to emphasise that the context was one of discussion together rather than adversarial debate.

As I have mentioned earlier, one point of divergence is the differing status of the sources that we have drawn on in compiling the Report. For Roman Catholics the Conciliar documents, and especially the documents of the Second Vatican Council, are primary official sources of doctrine and practice that have authority via the *magisterium* over the whole church. (We were interested to note as Baptists that there is a developing hermeneutical

¹³ The Declaration can be accessed at:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html, consulted on 08 May 2015.

¹⁴ This Report can be accessed at:

http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/101713/conversations_around_the_world.pdf, consulted on 08 May 2015.

¹⁵ Cardinal Walter Kaspar, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009).

tradition growing up around the documents of Vatican II, including some occasional but significant differences in the translation of the original Latin in the latest editions of the Vatican II material.) In addition to the Conciliar documents, the other major source of Roman Catholic teaching that is widely drawn on in the Report is the Catholic Catechism. Still other documents reflect Papal teaching. It would certainly be wrong to see Roman Catholic *interpretations* of this teaching as monolithic, but nevertheless these documents constitute certain foundational ‘givens’ in any theological Conversations.

For Baptists the situation is rather different. As already pointed out, we are used to prefacing some statements with a disclaimer that, ‘Some Baptist accept this, whilst other Baptists may not’.

Nevertheless, we have drawn on, and referenced in footnotes, the early Baptist Confessions of Faith, mainly from the English beginnings of Baptist life in the seventeenth century, but also documents based on them such as the Philadelphia Confession of the USA. We have also drawn on later Baptist statements on topics such as the church, the sacraments/ordinances and ministry.

In an important footnote (*7) we recognise that for Baptists these references are given only as illustrations of points being made and that these confessions are not binding on the local church, but rather provide guidance for teaching and explaining Baptists beliefs to those outside the Baptist community. The ‘*magisterium*’ for Baptists remains the local church gathered to seek the mind of Christ in fellowship with other churches, and such Confessions and Statements as there are, are there to help and illuminate that process.

3. Foundational Theological Framework

The Report, *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, is in five sections and the first two are foundational to the rest. These are: ‘The Koinonia of the Triune God and the Church’ (Section II); and ‘The Authority of Christ in Scripture’ (Section iii). The way we have together tackled the later sections on Sacraments/Ordinances, the role of Mary, and *episcopate* and ministry, follows the basic affirmations made and convergences arrived at in these sections. In other words, the whole report must be seen in an overarching context of ecclesiology and the interplay and dynamic relationship between Scripture and Tradition as God speaks his Word to that church.

Section II: The *Koinonia* of the Triune God and the Church (*7-33)

The 1984-88 dialogue identified ‘the shape of *koinonia*’ as it is made actual in the church’ (*4) as a key issue which needed further exploration. The present Report draws on the growing ecumenical consensus on the church as *koinonia*; that the communion that exists in the Triune God is the foundation for the communion of the church. God in God-self corresponds to God for us (*15).

The One God exists from eternity in a life of relationship, in a communion (*koinonia*) of three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son is the Word of God as God’s self-communication of self-giving love. Jesus Christ is thus God’s self-revelation who draws us into the communion of God’s own triune life and into communion (*koinonia*) with each other. This means that the Word of God in the church in the fullest sense is Christ himself who rules as Lord in the grace and power of the Spirit. (*7)

You will see that this uses rather Baptist language of the rule of Christ who is always present in his church, and this is explored further in this section. So a point of convergence is this understanding of the church as *koinonia*, (communion, participation, fellowship) grounded in the *koinonia* of the triune God, and in which believers are then joined together in communion.

An important discussion between us was the exploration of the relationship between the local church and the wider church and the way in which *koinonia* applies to different expressions of ‘church’. And this is perhaps a good example of the methodology employed in our Conversations. In (*11-12) we note a convergence in the importance of relationships of the local to the universal church, but then there is a long discussion in (*13-15) about both convergence and divergence on the outworking of this basic agreement in our two traditions.

For Catholics the local (or particular church) means the church gathered round the bishop, i.e. the diocese, and characterised by the preaching of the Gospel and the celebration of the Eucharist. The ministry of the bishop is essential to preserve the continuity of the apostolic origins of the church.

For Baptists the local church is, of course, the single congregation gathered under the rule of Christ. The elements of preaching the word and celebrating the Lord’s Supper are there, as is faithfulness to the teaching of the apostles which points to Christ in the preaching ministry and life of the local church.

We go on to explore further divergence in the understanding of the wider ‘church’, the Catholic church understanding itself as one church ‘subsisting’—concretely realised—in each local church; for the Baptists local churches complete in themselves are nevertheless in communion with others in associations, unions, and conventions. They listen to the voice of the wider church but preserving the freedom to order its own life under the rule of Christ cannot be infringed. Historically Baptists have found it helpful to use the biblical language of covenant to describe the local church community in its relationship to God in Christ, the relationships between its members, and its wider relationships. This notion of covenant is seen as a point of convergence with Catholics and then its implications explored. In this way the notions of the church as *koinonia* have brought together in dialogue the Catholic ‘communion ecclesiology’ (*11) and Baptist ‘covenant ecclesiology’ (*17).

Towards the end of this section (*23 on) there is an important discussion of what we each mean by the ‘visible communion’ of the church, noting some intra-Baptist divergence on this point and our Baptist view of unity in reconciled diversity rather than uniformity. Behind all this, of course, is the official Catholic teaching that Baptists and most other Christian traditions cannot be regarded as churches in the fullest sense, but rather as ecclesial communions because they lack fully visible and organic unity with the Church of Rome. For Baptists, there is an important statement at the end of this section of our very different basis for regarding other Christian bodies as ‘church’; looking for the marks of the church of Jesus Christ before searching for doctrinal agreement. I think that as Baptists we can welcome this convergence on the idea of the church as *koinonia*, communion, community of the baptised. Recent Baptist writing has supported this, e.g. the phrase of Nigel Wright concerning the church as ‘community of disciples’.¹⁶

What we were able to do here was to bring together Catholic ‘communion ecclesiology’ and Baptist ‘covenant theology’ and find much common ground. Both emphasise that we are joined in *koinonia* to God by our participation in the life of the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the same time we are joined to one another through participation in the in the community of believers gathered by Christ in his church.

Of course we also see the differences here when we come to the outworking of *koinonia* in the life and structure of the churches. For Catholics *koinonia* is achieved as every parish is in communion with its bishop, and the college of bishops in communion with the bishop of Rome.

¹⁶ Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), Chapter 3, pp. 49-70.

For Baptists the local church lives under the rule of Christ and has the freedom under God to order its own life under the rule of Christ. And of course, ecclesial communion for Catholics is based on participation in the Eucharist led by a priest standing in succession to the Apostles.

We were able to agree on the ‘catholicity’ of the church understood as ‘the fullness of God’s self-manifestation in Christ and as the final destination of the gospel message in reaching and transforming all people’ (*29). In our discussions and in our meeting with Pope Benedict, it seemed important to affirm that Baptists consider themselves part of the one holy Catholic and apostolic church. However, for Catholics this phrase means (*31) a fully visible and organic unity in time and space. Baptists would see the church as still sinful and having visible and invisible aspects, in need of constant renewal and reformation.

But entering into this basic agreement about the church as *koinonia* is, I would say, only possible if Baptists continue to explore the rich seam of covenant theology which was so important to the early Baptists in England and America but which seems to have got lost in many parts of the Baptist world. The later developments of voluntarism (which so often ignores the vertical aspect of covenant), and autonomy (which means ‘self- rule’) to describe the essence of the church can only partially experience the richness of *koinonia*, communion, and covenant.

Section III: The Authority of Christ in Scripture and Tradition (*34-71)

The second foundational section from the report deals with Scripture and Tradition. At the beginning of this section we summarise by saying that:

participants were able to identify a deepened and striking convergence on the nature of Scripture as the inspired Word of God and its central place in the life of the church, along with a mutual welcome for two developments that surfaced during this new phase of dialogue: a more appreciative assessment of the value of tradition and its relation to Scripture by the Baptist participants, and a more critical approach to tradition in its relation to Scripture by the Catholic participants. (*34)

Here again we discovered that the way we had traditionally viewed this question of Scripture and Tradition in one another was not entirely accurate.

Both Baptists and Catholics agreed that Scripture is central to the life of the church, with the church standing under the Word of God; and that Christ himself as revealed in the Scriptures is the final authority for the beliefs and life of the Christian Church. Since Vatican II the Roman Catholics have spoken of sacred Scripture and Tradition both coming from

the same wellspring and cannot be separated. The following convergence statement is striking:

‘God is the author of Sacred Scripture’. The church ‘accepts as sacred and canonical all the books of both the Old Testament and the New, in their entirety and with all their parts, in the conviction that they were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit...and therefore have God as their originator: on this basis they were handed on to the church’. (*41)

Considering further paragraphs (*43-44) of the Report, it is a challenge to Baptists to recognise that as well as the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit ‘preserving’ Scripture throughout the centuries, the Spirit also moved in church tradition, not least in the process that led to the final canonising of Scripture, the result of which we Baptists accept along with the rest of the Christian church.

The emphasis for Roman Catholics is on a communal tradition of the interpretation of Scripture via its episcopal leadership and the teaching authority of its *magisterium* (*48-49). Catholics welcomed the statement that Baptists, too, locate the communal interpretation of Scripture in the church; primarily, of course, in the local gathered congregation, in what is sometimes known as congregational hermeneutics. It would be interesting to know how much this actually happens among us!

A key issue given to us by the earlier Conversations in the 1980s was the development of doctrine. In an important paragraph (*55) we note how some recent Baptist scholars have tried to break through the setting up of Scripture *versus* Tradition, by affirming something of a shared tradition with the whole church. (One sign of this was the famous occasion of reciting the Apostles’ Creed at the first Congress of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905.) And on the other hand, we noticed a more critical approach to the formation of tradition by the Catholic participants, and that the whole church, and not just its Episcopal authority, has a role in the formation of doctrine. This is what is known as the *sensus fidelium*.

To quote Paul Fiddes in his Introductory article to the Report,

It is apparent from the Report that the Baptist participants have made an important discovery—that the corporate communal interpretation of scripture in the church meeting together with a vital practice of preaching in which interpretation of scripture is handed on down through the congregation, is nothing less than ‘tradition’. It is tradition, for instance to read the Old Testament in the light of God’s revelation in Christ, finding fore-shadowings of Christ there, a practice shared with Roman Catholic interpretation. On the other hand Roman Catholic theology, at least since the Second Vatican Council, has understood ‘tradition’ in a dynamic way which distinguishes

‘tradition’ which is Christ-centred and Christ-inspired from merely institutional ‘traditions’.¹⁷

However there is no doubt that as the Report puts it, ‘it can hardly be denied that Catholics and Baptists have different approaches to the nature of tradition’ (*62), with Baptists speaking of ‘faith and practice’ rather than ‘tradition’, generally only allowing those traditions which support the primacy of Scripture. From (*62) with its quotation of the Vatican II document, *Dei Verbum*, there is both convergence on the need for Tradition to stand under the correction of Scripture but at the same time divergence on the phrase from *Dei Verbum* that ‘both scripture and tradition are to be accepted and honoured with like feelings of devotion and reverence’ (*65). As Baptists we understand better what this means (as set out in *65), but we were not able to accept it. It would seem to us to undermine the corrective function of Scripture as the ‘norming norm’ of all development of doctrine

I think that the overall challenge for us Baptists is to come to terms with that, whilst we seek to live by the Reformation watchword *sola scriptura*; we acknowledge the main point of convergence here that it is the Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures who is God’s living Word. And we should recognise that we do have a living and sometimes changing tradition of the interpretation of Scripture and its application to contemporary questions. Changes in attitude among Baptists to questions of slavery and women in ministry are examples of this. It seems to me that it is not enough to say ‘the Bible says’ without engaging in the demanding and careful work of hermeneutics, and the story of that process constitutes something of a tradition.

4. Subsequent Sections of the Report

Section IV: Baptism and Lord’s Supper or Eucharist: the Visible Word of God in the *Koinonia* of the Church (*72-131)

I mentioned earlier that there was an intra-Baptists discussion whether to speak of sacraments or ordinances and that we have used sacrament/ordinance as a convention throughout. The opening convergence statement here is that: ‘**Sacraments/ordinances are signs through which God acts, visible signs of invisible grace or divine blessing**’ (*73).

As you might expect, there is much discussion of the interplay of grace and faith in baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Here again the intra-Baptist discussion was important, between those Baptists who ‘would lay stress on

¹⁷ Fiddes, ‘A Conversation in Context’, p. 18.

the “remembering” at the Lord’s table and the witness of baptism to a regeneration which has already taken place in the life of the believer’ (*75), and others who might want to speak more sacramentally of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as meeting points of grace and faith in which God in freedom can act. But even this latter group would not be able to agree with the statement from the Catholic catechism that: ‘By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit that the Sacraments “make present efficaciously the grace that they signify’ (*74). For Baptists, only Christ offers such grace.

Also, we noted convergence by both Catholics and Baptists (*85) wishing to affirm the full freedom of God in relation to the sacraments/ordinances; and it was a learning point for Baptists that the *ex opere operato* account of the sacraments could be interpreted this way by Catholics; that ‘the final effect of the sacraments is always the result of a harmonic exchange between the objective and the subjective, the gift of God and personal attitude’ (*89). Nevertheless, Baptists continue to be uncomfortable with language that suggests that sacraments confer grace or ‘effect grace’ (*90).

Perhaps the most important convergence on baptism (*101) was the acceptance of something put forward by Baptists in other ecumenical dialogues, notably that of the Baptist World Alliance with the Anglican World Communion. It is becoming an accepted ecumenical norm to refer to Christian unity as being based on the notion of ‘common baptism’ (*103). This has proved problematic for most Baptists and in response Paul Fiddes and others have developed the idea of a common ‘process of initiation’ (*102). Interestingly, the idea of becoming a Christian by means of a journey and initiation in several stages also appears in the Catholic Catechism.

So the convergence here is that this common initiation involves conversion, water baptism, reception of the Spirit (for Catholics, confirmation), and a sharing in the Eucharist, followed by a lifelong journey of discipleship; even though amongst Baptists and Catholics these stages will usually happen in a different order, and there is a different balance of the grace of God and the faith of the believer and the community at each point.

On the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist we should note agreement from (*121 ff.) on the elements of thanksgiving (*eucharistia*), remembering and participating (*anamnesis*), and the call upon the Holy Spirit to make the presence of Christ real to his disciples (*epiclesis*). The following paragraphs explore the different interpretations we each give to these three elements. We interpret the ‘real presence of Christ in the Eucharist very differently; for the Catholics *in* the elements themselves (transubstantiation), and for the Baptist *through* the use of the elements. The other obvious divergence is on the

Catholic insistence on the necessity of the sacramental office of ministry to celebrate the Lord’s Supper as guarantor of the presence of Christ.

Clearly, Baptists will respond more or less positively to this convergence according to their own theological understanding of the sacraments/ordinances. There has been a movement among British Baptists, building on the sacramental understanding of the ordinances by some early British Baptist theologians, towards a more ‘sacramental’ understanding of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, rather than them being simply signs of that which has already occurred. Famously, C. H. Spurgeon held such a view of the Lord’s Supper (of Christ as ‘really’ present), and the actual practice of the ordinances/sacraments by many in Eastern Europe would seem to suggest an understanding of them as meeting places of grace and faith.

Section V: Mary as Model of Discipleship in the Communion of the Church (*132-161)

On the theological affirmations and doctrinal statements concerning Mary we might expect to find some of our greatest divergence, and indeed in many ways this proved to be the case. As well as the theological statements about Mary, the Baptists present expressed concerns about some of the ways Mary is used as a model of womanhood that can appear oppressive, a point which led to at least some convergence in the discussion following (*150). Also it is worth mentioning that a fine paper from one of the Latin American Baptists dealt with some of the cultural oppression experienced by Baptists and other non-Catholics by the religious and political use of the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican society.

To return to the theological issues, one affirmation that Baptists felt they could make is the affirmation from the early Christian Councils onwards of Mary as *theotokos* (*God-bearer*, better than *Mother of God*) (*143). Whilst this is not familiar to most Baptists, it is essentially a Christological affirmation of Christ’s divinity. Whilst affirming the doctrine behind it, Baptist reluctance to use the term itself is understandable, especially as a number of other Marian doctrines follow from it for the Catholics: perpetual virginity, Immaculate Conception, and Glorious Assumption.

On these latter two dogmas (Immaculate Conception and Glorious Assumption), promulgated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the result, Catholics would say, of centuries of reflection on passages such as Luke 1, Baptists were not able to find any scriptural basis or historical foundation for them. (*147-8)

As to the sinlessness of Mary held by the Catholic Church, Baptists could find no reason to believe that Mary was sinless (*148) and ask how

she who never sinned could be forgiven and redeemed. As we remark at the end of (*149), our discussion pointed ‘to a different outworking of the relation of Scripture and tradition in our two communities’.

The Baptist participants found agreement on a model of Mary as ‘faithful disciple’ (*150 on) there from the birth of Christ to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. She is a representative, rather than a mother figure, of the church,¹⁸ with the reservations expressed above about how Mary as a model of discipleship for women has sometimes been presented.

Finally in this section, Baptists would reject praying *to* Mary in intercession but saw no reason why we cannot pray *with* Mary in the communion of saints. (*156-8)

This, indeed, was the area of our work that perhaps showed the greatest divergence. Yet there is a challenge to Baptists to rehabilitate Mary as the one chosen by God to bear the Saviour, and to make more of her example of faithful discipleship.

Section VI: The Ministry of Oversight (*Episcope*) and Unity in the Life of the Church (*162-204)

As with the notion of the church as *koinonia*, in this section we draw on an ecumenical convergence; that *episcope* (oversight) in the church is exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways. Baptists begin with the communal, that is, the local church gathered under the rule of Christ who then calls out from the community personal leadership in the form of pastors and collegial leadership in the form of deacons or church board members. In this way *episcope* is a dynamic concept, flowing between all three categories in the life of a local church.

In (*168), which simply states that: ‘Our differing patterns of *episcope* seek to be faithful to Scripture and to the apostolic tradition’, and onwards from there, we examine the patterns of ministry, each tradition taking the same Scripture verse to determine either a threefold (Catholic) order of bishops, presbyters and deacons, or the normal twofold order for Baptists of bishops/presbyters and deacons. We recall that some early Baptists churches called their pastor ‘Bishop’. In his commentary Stephen Homes suggests that what he calls some more ‘creative mapping’ might be possible here:

The report identifies that the episcopal ministry of oversight is seen by Baptists to be exercised by the ordained minister of the local church; this might recall the immediate post-apostolic Christian situation which, historians tend to agree, centred around one bishop celebrating one Eucharist for one congregation. That is, if the Baptist (senior) pastor is identified with the bishop of a single – parish diocese (in Catholic terms) there might be more theological convergence

¹⁸ French Baptists also saw this a point of convergence in their own Conversations with Roman Catholics.

between the two practices of church life than is identified in the Report. In practice, translocal unity amongst Baptist congregations is often achieved by the fellowship shared by the pastors; this might be argued to map rather nicely on to Catholic claims that the basis of catholicity is the fellowship of Bishops, although the particular place of the Bishop of Rome at the centre of catholic unity has no parallel in Baptist life.¹⁹

It is true that Catholics begin with the personal *episcopate* of the bishop, and move from that to the collegial oversight of a college of bishops. (The communal understanding of *episcopate* is harder to discern, though some find it in the *sensus fidelium*, the common understanding of doctrine by the faithful.)

Catholicity is expressed in the fact that for both Catholics and Baptists *episcopate* is exercised in the local or particular church but always in communion with the wider church (*176 on). For Catholics this is with the bishops and through them to the Bishop of Rome. Baptists may differ among themselves as to how much they see their pastors as being ministers of the church in general as well as the particular local church, but have usually affirmed that ‘the local congregation is wholly the church but not the whole church’ (*178).

The apostolicity of the church, the faithfulness to the teaching of the apostles, is guaranteed for Catholics by what they see as an unbroken apostolic succession of bishops, who then ordain priests. For Baptists apostolicity would primarily consist of the local church and its pastor’s fidelity to the apostolic teaching and doctrine as found in Scripture (*190).

We agree that personal *episcopate* is established by Christ for the good of the church (*186), but whilst for Catholics this is tied to the office of an ordained priest as of the *esse* of the church, for Baptists ordained ministry belongs to the wellbeing (*bene esse*) of the church. For us a church can still be a church without an ordained pastor. There is an important note in (*172) about the diversity of Baptist views about the ordination and ministry of women.

Finally, we deal with the question of *episcopate* in terms of the ministry of universal primacy of the Pope. Our conclusions can be summed up by the first sentence of (*196), that:

at the present time Baptists and Catholics have no agreement about whether Christ’s will for the unity of the whole church includes an individual ministry such as the papacy in service to universal unity, [as envisaged by the late John

¹⁹ Stephen Holmes, ‘Reflections on the Word of God in the Life of the Church’, *American Baptist Quarterly*, Volume XXXI, Number 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 141-142 (pp. 138-153).

Paul II in his encyclical '*Ut Unum Sint*'] nor how such a ministry might be exercised.

We go on to explore our differing interpretations of the Petrine passages in the New Testament, and our differing views of the post-biblical development of the papacy.

We do say that as Baptists we might conceive of such a worldwide ministry being shared among a *group* of leaders, and we mention some national examples in which Baptist leaders have participated (*196). And we encourage Baptists to consider further how such a ministry of unity could be exercised (*204). It is probably appropriate that our last comment expressing convergence (*201 on) calls both Catholics and Baptists to address the failures of the past with repentance and appropriate action in the present, especially with reference to the papacy and some of our intemperate criticisms of it as Baptists.

Section VII: Concluding Reflections (*205 – 212)

There is a useful summary of some of the important points of our Report in the Concluding Reflections in which we say again that we have achieved a surprising amount of convergence and common mind on these theological issues that traditionally have been the most divisive between us, though of course many important differences remain.

And so to the very final paragraph (*212) in which we express perhaps our most important conclusion for the present time that on the basis of our discussions we believe that:

we should at least be able to say that we can each discern in one another's communion characteristics of the church of Christ, because we can recognise there the presence of Christ, the Lord of the church. We can enjoy a 'certain', though imperfect communion.

5. Concluding Comments

My own life experience is as someone who was raised in the West of Scotland in the 1960s in a context of antagonism between Protestants and Catholics that sometimes became sectarian hatred, not unlike that found in Northern Ireland.²⁰ You might imagine the journey I have been on since I left that context. But one of the things that these Conversations emphasise for me is that it is important to deal with the Roman Catholic Church as it is now, not as it used to be in the pre-Vatican II days. On these doctrinal and theological issues that have traditionally divided us this is what this Report seeks to do.

²⁰ The potato famines in nineteenth century Ireland brought many Irish settlers to the west of Scotland.

The Report does deal with strictly theological issues. Apart from the sessions we had on Mary, we did not really touch the issues of ‘folk religion’ and popular local ‘cults’ that are an important part of popular Catholicism and are often the first point of criticism by Baptists. We did not deal with the official Catholic conservative stance on many ethical issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, which pleases some Baptists and alienates others.

In his commentary Josué Fonseca speaks of changing attitudes in Latin America and says:

Because of the enduring influence of Southern Baptist missionary efforts, the attitude of Baptists towards Catholics in Latin America has been characterised by hostility rather than mutual respect. Roman Catholic priests have also contributed to antagonistic relations by their critical language and negative teachings against Baptists and other evangelical Protestants. People in both groups now recognise the importance of these conversations because of the biblical teaching that has been practised in the gatherings from our congregations and communities, especially related to the prayer of Jesus that the church might be one (John 17:21).²¹

However, despite what the Report describes as ‘an astonishing amount of convergence and common mind’ (*205) the painful fact remains that it is not yet possible for our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters to fully accept Baptists as part of the one Church of Jesus Christ. On the Baptist side, of course, we have to deal with those Baptists who say that no Roman Catholic can be a true Christian, and have often identified the Roman Catholic Church with a less than wholesome image from the Book of Revelation. And yet the close friendship enjoyed by Billy Graham and the late Pope John Paul II, both recognising the Christian evangelist in the other, points to a more hopeful scenario where for the sake of the Gospel and the Kingdom we can find common ground with each other in our witness to the world.

These Conversations took place during the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI. As I have just indicated, who knows what further windows in the Vatican may be opening by his successor Pope Francis? Perhaps the solid work done by these Conversations can provide the basis of a future drawing closer together to explore what it means in practice to celebrate the church as ‘*koinonia*’.

Meanwhile, change continues to take place on the ground. Earlier this year, I had one of the most moving experiences of my life. I was present on a hillside just outside Bethlehem on a site designated for a further building

²¹ Josué Fonseca, ‘A Response to the Report of the International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance’, *American Baptist Quarterly*, Volume XXXI, Number 1 (Spring 2012), p. 124 (pp. 123-137).

of the Israeli Security Wall, known by Palestinians as the Wall of Apartheid. It will cut off local Palestinians from their olive trees that provide their income and livelihood. The local Palestinian Catholic priest felt helpless in the face of this threat. What could he do? He decided to go to the hillside under threat every Friday and at the traditional time of the Crucifixion, 15.00, to celebrate the Eucharist. He had done this for two years in all weathers, sometimes with just a few others, sometimes more. On that particular Friday many of us joined him from a conference for evangelicals in Bethlehem. The priest said to us, 'I am so thankful that you have come to stand in solidarity with us as brothers and sisters in Christ. Now you are all welcome to participate in and receive the Eucharist'.²²

For me, away from all the very stimulating and necessary academic debates which find their culmination in this Report, this was *koinonia* lived out courageously by a priest for whom strict adherence to church law and tradition seemed secondary to the deep communion experienced by all who were present on that hillside outside Bethlehem, a communion which he did not want to break, but instead wanted to express in a Eucharist shared by all.

This would have been far from the minds of the Catholic participants in our Conversations, but it is surely in the spirit of the very last words of the Report:

We hope that this kind of mutual acknowledgement may have an effect at local levels of Baptist and Catholic churches in their life and mission, beyond the rarefied heights of theological conversations. In the local congregations and parishes, may this discernment of Christ in one another be echoed. May Christ, the Word of God, continue to guide, correct and renew us according to his Word. (*212)

Tony Peck
General Secretary, European Baptist Federation

²² Personal recollection.

Book Reviews

Jan Hábl, *Teaching and Learning through Story: Comenius' Labyrinth and the Educational Potential of Narrative Allegory*. Pedagogy in Europe: The Past and The Future Series. Volume 8. Foreword Prof. Thomas K. Johnson. Translated from Czech to English by Anne O'Donnell and Jan Hábl. Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft (Culture and Science Publications) Dr. Thomas Schirmacher, 2014, 118 pages, ISSN 1430-9068 / ISBN 978-3-86269-090-9

Building up further on the findings of his doctoral dissertation¹ and his earlier publications², Jan Hábl continues his imaginative engagement with the thought of Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius) – the father of modern pedagogy. In his new book he brings another dimension of Comenius' pre-modern thought-pattern – the narrative, and explores its value for contemporary educational theory. It is evident that Hábl is very much at home with Komenský's educational philosophy or rather holistic theological and teleological anthropology as well as with the currents in Czech educational philosophical discourse. His primary point of interest in this manuscript is the exploration of the educational potential of allegory for didactic narrativisation. The aim of this research is two-fold: to explore educational potential of narrative and to introduce the concept of educational narrativisation as a means of turning educational material into stories.

Hábl's argument advances from the assessment of the story as a pedagogical device through an in-depth look at the use of Komenský's *Labyrinth*³ as a vehicle into the nature of the narration for pedagogical purposes to a critique of modern story-less educational meta-narratives of the pedagogy of modernity. The foreword and the three appendices provide further helpful insights into the background and pedagogical applications of Hábl's proposal.

¹ Jan Hábl, 'The Challenge of Komenský's Anthropological Teleology to Modern Czech Pedagogy,' PhD thesis, University of Wales via IBTS Prague, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2008, ISBN: 9781124714509.

² See, among others: Jan Hábl, 'School as Workshop of Humanity: J.A. Komenský's Pedagogical Anthropology,' *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 11:1 (September, 2010), pp. 36-40, ISSN 1213-1520; Idem, 'Character Formation: A Forgotten Theme of Comenius's Didactics,' *Journal of Education and Christian Belief*, 15:2 (2011), pp. 141-150, ISSN: 1366-5456; Idem, *Ultimate Human Goals in Comenius and Modern Pedagogy*, Hradec Kralove: Gaudeamus, 2011, ISBN 978-80-7435-126-6; Idem, *Lessons in Humanity: From the Life and Work of Jan Amos Komenský*, Pedagogy in Europe: The Past and The Future Series, volume 8, Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2011, EAN: 9783862690176).

³ Jan Amos Komenský, *Labyrint světa a ráj srdce v jazyce 21. století* (The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart in the Language of the 21st Century). Poutníková četba. Ústí nad Labem, 2010, in Czech.

Hábl's objectives in this work are essentially laid-down in the second chapter of the book. They are captured neatly by the chapter's title: "The Didactic Magic of Narrative Allegory" and summarised with a reference to Komenský's literary (and didactic) masterpiece *Labyrinth* in the end of that chapter. The third chapter offers a broad look of the modern use and misuse of the notion of meta-narrative or 'great story', which Hábl tries to redeem following in Komenský's footsteps. This chapter includes a little known and neatly presented story of a personal encounter of Komenský with René Descartes. This story illustrates well the characteristic divergence of the two thinkers' understanding of what constitutes a reliable source of knowledge at the dawn of modernity. The concept of didactic narrativisation in its two-fold use as pedagogical practice – psychological and philosophical/theological, is re-stated and its virtue-formative power is elaborated in the last chapter of the book.

Considering Hábl's intended audience of Czech educationists, one may understand the rather narrower focus of this research primarily on the academic contributions of Czech (or in Czech) and Continental European authors. Contributions of Anglo-American authors are largely missing. A wider perspective on the holistic character of narrative, particularly of the originators of the narrative philosophical and theological discourse of the Chicago literary-critical school, Hans Frei (and Yale school of biblical narrative studies) and James Wm. McClendon, Jr. (and Californian school of narrative theology), could enhance the book's argument. Such attention to Anglo-American narrative tradition would assist in firmer grounding of the claim that no-narrative pedagogical discourse is reductive (p. 17) in comparison to didactic narrativisation. Even so, the book offers fresh and well substantiated contribution to narrative philosophising from the viewpoint of didactics. Hábl's conceptualisation of educational narrativisation is potent and stimulating. The author's prose is clear, lucid and engaging.

The Revd Doc Dr Parush R Parushev
Vice- Rector, IBTS Centre in
Amsterdam

J. Denny Weaver, ed., with Earl Zimmerman, Zachary J. Walton, Gerald J. Mast, Ted Grimsrud, and Glen Harold Stassen, *John Howard Yoder: Radical Theologian*. Foreword by Marva J. Dawn. Afterword by Lisa Schirch. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books. An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014, pbk. xviii + 420 pages, ISBN 13: 978-1-62564-585-2

A team of baptistic authors have produced a fitting tribute to John Howard Yoder's extraordinary contributions to contemporary theology while at the

same time having taken a close look at his troubled human relationships. The collection presents thoughtful reflections on the impressive breadth of Yoder's radical, Jesus-centred approach to theology and peace guided social ethics. Radicality here is understood as reaching back to the primitive Christianity rather than to the Nicene orthodoxy for inspiration in charting ways forward to embracing the Way of Christ in contemporary social realities. What sets this volume apart from the collections of this kind is the coherence of the project steered by the editor's guiding vision. While the authors have been personal acquaintances of Yoder for shorter or longer period of time, the set of essays is not a sum-total of desperate entries of friends and colleagues celebrating the academic career of a distinguished scholar in a *Festschrift* at a jubilee date or honouring posthumously the author's life achievement in a *Gedenkschrift*. The composition of the book and the selection of the essays' main themes have been directed by the editor's longing, shared by the contributing authors, to respond to the array of divergent interpretive portrayals of Yoder's theology, ethics and of his legacy in the last quarter of a century.

The contributions to the book are structured in three uneven parts. The authors cohere around the central claim of the collection that Christology – with deep roots in the narrative of Jesus of the New Testament, his life, ministry and vision – takes priority in Yoder's whole lifework both in content and as a method (p. 21). In an extended first chapter of the book, Weaver finds evidence for backing this claim up not only in Yoder's most influential work *The Politics of Jesus* but, importantly in Yoder's careful exegesis and methodological considerations presented in his posthumously published *Preface to Theology* and his earlier essay 'But We Do See Jesus'.

The middle part of the book is an insightful exploration into the sources of Yoder's Christology. Zimmerman looks at the sixteenth century Anabaptism as an inspirational force for Yoder's thought and at the development of his original assessment of the inherited identification and scholarship. Walton focuses on the Yoder's innovative restatement of Harold S. Bender's 'anabaptist vision'. In the concluding two chapters of this part of the book Zimmerman and Mast reflect on the 'Swiss' period of Yoder's formation, particularly in his reading of the gospel narrative and his theological ethics, under the influence of and in response to the scholarship of Oscar Cullmann and Karl Barth.

The third part of the book applies, extends and advances Yoder's christological methodology to a number of social ethical predicaments. Grimsrud, Zimmerman, Mast, Stassen and Weaver analyse the validity and fruition of Yoder's argument for the continuity of Jesus' ethical vision in Paul's ethics; for the believing community's 'body politics' and for a pacifism guided by an ana-baptistic vision to become public witnesses of the

community to the surrounding culture; for non-violent public ethics of peacemaking; and for the significance of Christ-centred ethics in interfaith (Jewish-, Muslim-, Hindu-Christian) dialogue. In the final chapter of the third part, Weaver and Mast illustrate how Yoder's method can be applied to 'in-house' conversations with the 'others' – e.g. evangelicals and 'new black theologians', with particular emphasis on narrative and atonement imagery.

A rare feature of this collection is the attempt to avoid hagiographic exaltation of the theologian to the expense of the fallible human being behind his thought. The authors are well aware and willing to address Yoder's sorry demeanour with female students and colleagues. The final two chapters of the book, written by Grimsrud and Mast, deal explicitly with Yoder's human fallibility, awkwardness and sexual misbehaviour. The book presents a realistic picture of a brilliant theologian and flawed human being. In the afterword, Lisa Schirch – a Mennonite and a feminist scholar, takes a critical look at Yoder's academic pacifist stand and his human failure to live up to it, and provides a needed balance (together with the foreword by Marva Down) to the male perspectives of the book's main authors. She also addresses the crucial issue of responsibility of the faith community to enable healing of wounds inflicted on victimised women and on the community.

The book has set up an ambitious goal to present an alternative interpretation of Yoder's thought to other treatments of his theology and ethics and to supersede them (p.1) with a better understanding of Yoder's theological and ethical perspective grounded solidly on his christological reading of Scriptures. Were the authors able to establish a commanding perspective on Yoder's theology and ethics? This is yet to be tested out. One thing is clear: The contributors to this volume succeeded in presenting a compelling case for an honest, open-minded and fresh reading of one of the most influential theologians and social ethicists of the twentieth century in the lineage of the Radical Reformation. Uniquely within Yoderian scholarship, the contributors address forthrightly, wrestle with and draw lessons from Yoder's hurtful conduct and human failures. Undoubtedly this volume of considerate reflections will provide food-for-thought for the students of Christian theology and ethics in the time to come.

The Revd Doc Dr Parush R Parushev
Vice- Rector, IBTS Centre in
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